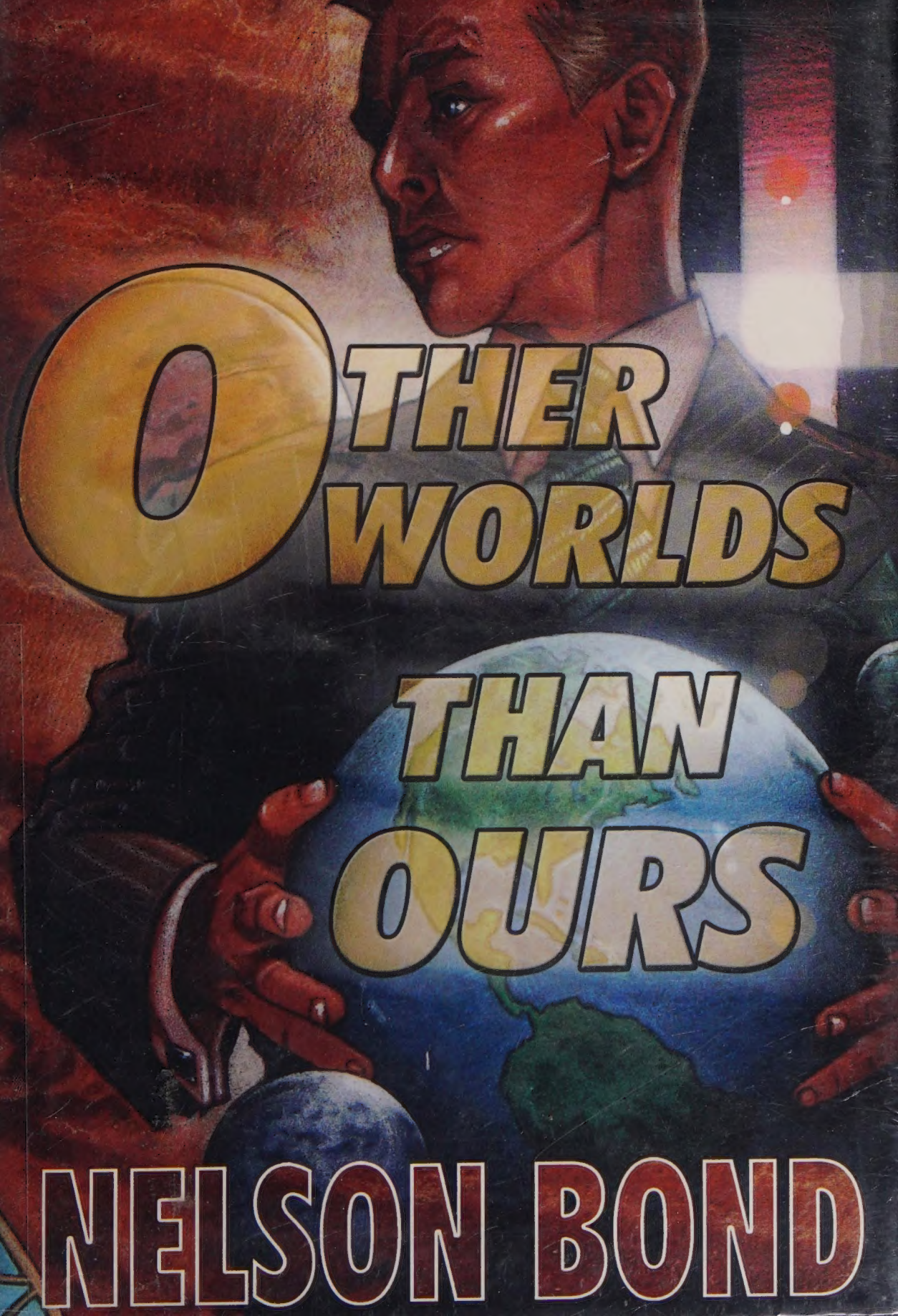




**OTHER
WORLDS**

**THAN
OURS**

NELSON BOND

Other Worlds Than Ours is Nelson Bond's 3rd book for Arkham House. It follows 1968's **Nightmares and Daydreams** and 2002's **The Far Side of Nowhere**. Both rank among Arkham House's fastest sellers, proving once again that Nelson Bond's reputation as a writer of fantasy fiction continues long after he ceased writing for publication.

This collection draws upon previously uncollected SF tales from the 1940s. The majority are hard to find novelettes originally published in *Blue Book*, *Astounding*, *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, *Planet Stories* and *Amazing Stories*. There is also a complete novel, the exciting **Gods of the Jungle**, which appeared in the June and July 1942 issues of *Amazing Stories*. An American pilot during World War II is forced to land in the jungle where he discovers an ancient temple that leads him to an ancient civilization founded by visitors to Earth.

The remaining 12 stories are grouped according to their subjects and cover travel to remote and distant planets in the universe, where travelers meet unusual adventures and sometimes terrifying creatures who inhabit remote planets and moons. "Martian Caravan" and "Wanderers of the Wolf Moon" are two rare and hard-to-find tales that will haunt you for a long time.

Arkham House has already contracted for another Nelson Bond book, **Probability Zero**. It will appear in the next few years and will publish many of his previously forgotten fantasy tales, and another long-lost novel.

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DISCARD

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Plays

Mr. Mergenthwirker's Lobblies

State of Mind

Animal Farm (adapted from the book by George Orwell)



Other Worlds Than Ours

Nelson Bond

Think not we are alone
Out there in space and time and other worlds
of infinite variety and hue

Arkham House Publishers, Inc.

2005

CPL

DISCARD

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Manufactured in the United States of America
First Edition

To my dear wife Betty
who has made this world
far better than all those
Other Worlds

If there is, as one or two readers have been kind enough to say, a certain versimilitude and conviction in my science-fiction stories, it is undoubtedly because I am not only a fantasy writer, but a fantasy fan as well. I became one “way back when,” and before there were such things as science-fiction magazines avidly devoured all I could unearth in the way of “conjectural fiction.” When I became a full-time writer, I elected to inject into my favorite field my own pet theories of the “World-to-Be.”

I am completely confident that in the days that lie before us—always, of course, barring the possibility of a “bloodthirsty guttersnipe” hurling mankind backward into a new Dark Age—those things of which we now read and write: space-travel, atomic power, interplanetary communication, etc., will be attained. I deeply wish I might be one of those who live to witness their attainment. But if I cannot, I must be content to be one of those who keeps the dream alive, in the hope that some bright-eyed youngster of today or tomorrow may, inspired, turn science-fiction into science-fact.

Nelson S. Bond

(Excerpted from a letter published in *Planet Stories*, Summer 1942.)

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*You are about to enter
The Fifth Dimension*

“Fifth dimension?” you say. “But there are only three: length, width and height.”

Oh, no. Those are the dimensions of *space*. But suppose we agree to meet on the third floor of a building at Broad and Main, and I arrive on Monday and you on Tuesday. We do not meet, for *time* is the fourth dimension.

“And the fifth?” you ask.

Take it a step farther. Set your meeting place not on Earth but on the planet Mars, and yet another dimension has been added: *imagination*. It is as simple as that.

The stories you are about to read are not of this world but of other worlds than ours, far beyond the world as we know it.

So relax. Enjoy. And come with me into the wondering world of the Fifth Dimension.

Nelson S. Bond



Legacy

His inheritance was remarkable—a robot with far-from-human intelligence, capable largely of making a nuisance of itself. Or so it seemed—

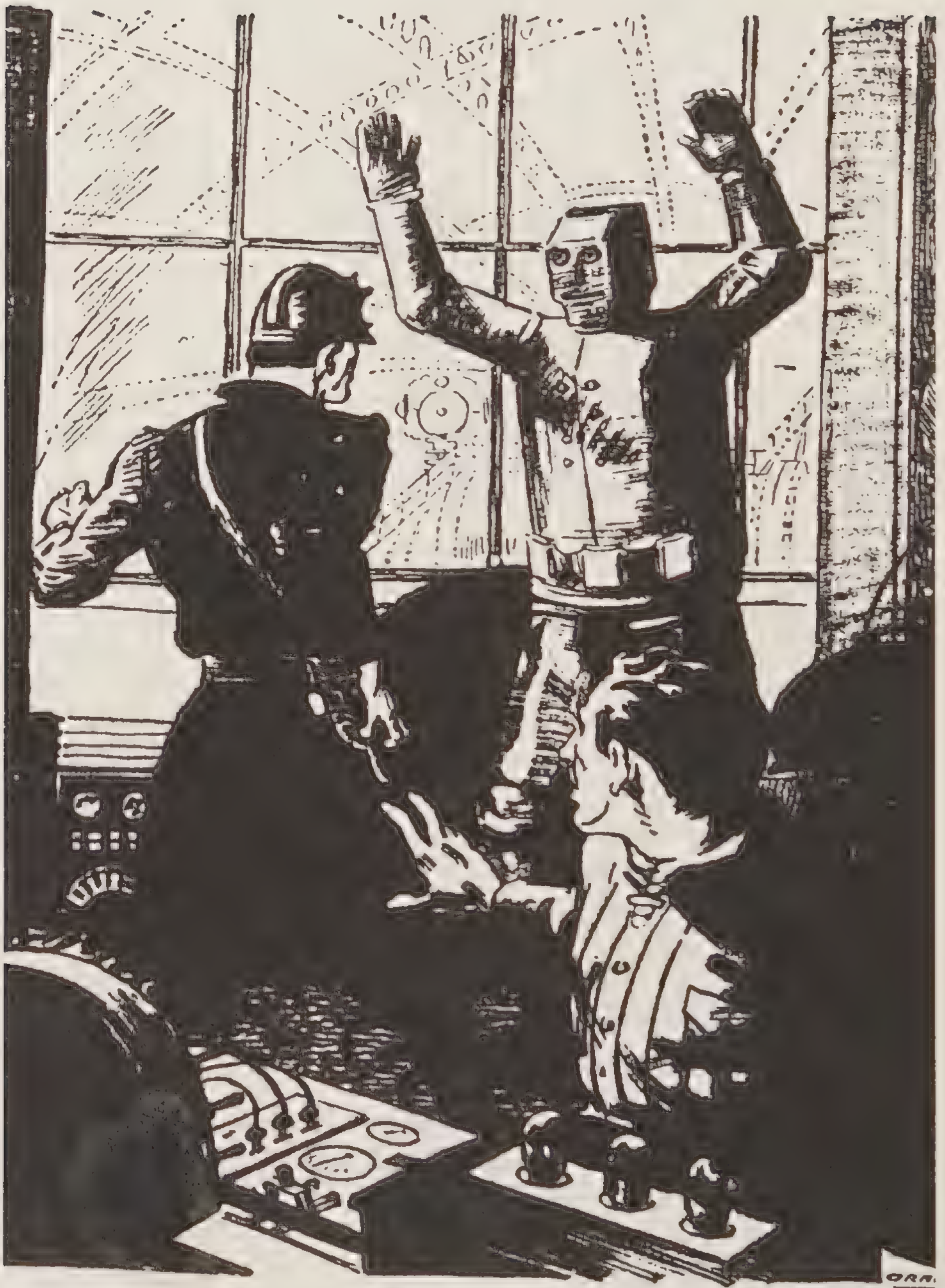
WE WERE ABOUT FIVE MINUTES OUT OF THE Mars II-layer when the door of my control turret banged open and in popped Cap Hawkins.

I took my feet down off the audio banks and shoved the copy of *Spaceways Weekly* I had been reading out of sight and said: “Look, skipper, I can explain everything I—”

But for once he was too excited to stunt my growth with verbal vitriol. His gray hair was bristling like the antennae of a Jovian glowworm in a thunderstorm; his optics were sticking out like they grew on stalks. He clutched my arm and yammered: “It’s come, Sparks! I got it by messenger just before we lifted gravs from Mars Central. Come along! I’m gonna open it now.”

He had me halfway down the corridor before I got a chance to gasp: “That’s swell, skipper. But, if it’s all the same to you, would you mind telling me what you’re talking about? What did you get? What are you going to open? You haven’t been writing to the Lonely Hearts Club again, have you?”

He turned pink and snorted: “Blast your jets, Bert Donovan, you know damn well I never done nothin’ like that. Or hardly ever. You’re the dumbest radioman I ever met, an’ that’s sayin’ a lot.



Don't you remember me tellin' you that my Uncle Lester died?"

I said faintly: "He . . . he didn't send you his mortal remains, I hope."

"No, you idiot! But his lawyers sent me the legacy he left me in his will. You oughta see! It's in a crate in the storage chamber. It must be somethin' terrific. The old man was as rich as a twelve-egg cake, an' I was his favorite nephew—"

"There's no accounting," I told him, "for tastes." But I was curious now, too. So pretty soon we were standing in the storage chamber, armed to the fingertips with hammers and crowbars, looking at a crate that had been delivered all the way across space from Earth to the *Andromeda*, somewhere off Mars.

The skipper looked like a cat in an aquarium. His grin was as broad as a lensman's shoulders. He spit on his hands with gusto and squealed: "O.K., Sparks, let's go!" So I spit on mine with saliva and did all the dirty work, while he stood around yipping and hollering every time I pried off another plank.

After a while, I was sweating like a Mercurian miner and the floor of the storage room was ankle-deep in lumber. But the crate was open, and there before us was a mysterious something draped in burlap like a mummy in a jute topcoat. I said: "Well, here goes! Now we'll see—" and made a pass at the canvas, but the skipper stopped me.

"Gently, Sparks, gently! It may be something very fragile. There's no hurry. It took us a long time to get it open; we can be patient for a few more seconds."

"We?" I demanded. "Where do you get the community spirit? I—"

Hawkins wasn't paying me any neverminds. With the stuffy aplomb of a politician unveiling a small-town memorial statue of himself, he snipped the cords, laid tender hands on the burlap, tugged.

"There, Sparks!" he declaimed. "Behold the gift of my late, dearly beloved Uncle Lest—"

Then he stopped, strangling. For staring imperturbably into our startled eyes was a rusty, worn-out, thousand-time-patched-and-welded robot!

The worst part was it wasn't even a *new* robot! A new robot would make a pretty nice gift for anybody—maybe not the kind Cap Hawkins had been expecting from his uncle, but a pretty nice gift just the same. Robots cost about two thousand credits, F.O.B. Birmingham, and many a housewife on the outer planets has

sobbed herself to sleep because friend hubby couldn't afford to buy her one.

But *this* jalopy was one hop-skip-and-jump from an antique collector's trophy room. It was about a 2189 model, which is to say approximately twenty years behind the times. It was one of the early experimental "androids," with only two arms, frontal visual apparatus, manual control buttons and knee-action stride instead of rollers. It was all steel; it didn't even have rubberoid foot soles. At a rough guess, I'd say the thing was worth maybe fifty credits—depending on the gullibility of the buyer.

All this I saw while Cap Hawkins was collapsing of grief, rage and disappointment at my side. Then, suddenly he decided not to have apoplexy, and he reverted to type. With a roar, he grabbed the crowbar from my hand and upped motors toward the silent robot.

"Legacy eh?" he howled. "So this is the legacy I get from my dear, departed uncle—fry his tight-fisted hide! Lend a hand, Sparks! I'm gonna bust this here fugitive from a junk pile into a million rusty rivets! Take *that!*" yelled the skipper. "And *that!*"

Metal went *whonk!* against metal: one of the robot's legs slipped and the crash was deafening. Cap Hawkins' gift sprawled seven ways from Tuesday, but as it fell, its fingers let fly a scrap of paper. I picked it up, saw the writing on the envelope, and was just in time to halt Hawkins' mashie shot at the android's cranium.

"Hold everything, Cap!" I squalled. "Here's a note addressed to you. Maybe it explains—"

"If it's from *him*," bellowed the skipper, "I ain't interested. Well, gimme it! What the hell's the idea of readin' somebody else's mail? Hm-m-m! It *is* from him—"

I read the letter over his shoulder. It was short, somewhat cryptic, and to the point:

DEAR NEPHEW CLARENCE:

This is Jessifer. Treat him well and follow his precepts and he will bring to you the same kind of happiness that has lightened my life.

The voice of Jessifer beside you in space should lead you to glowing contentment. He is not, as man, prone to error.

Your affectionate,
UNCLE LESTER.

P.S.: Button No. 3 controls his speech.

Cap Hawkins gargled the message twice aloud, snorting like a grampus. "Same kind of happiness that lightened his life, hey?" he howled mournfully. "The credit-hoardin' old miser! I bet he had safe-deposit vaults built into his coffin. 'Glowin' contentment' your eye! I'm burned up, if that's what he meant. Get outta my

way, Sparks! I'm gonna chop that museum piece into buck shot. *Jessifer!*"

And once again he prepared to play anvil chorus on Jessifer's wishbone. But I said: "Aw, take it easy, skipper! Jessifer's not a bad-looking stovepipe. Maybe Slops can set him to work in the galley. Anyway, it won't hurt to see how responsive he is—"

I levered Jessifer to his feet again, found the button Uncle Lester had mentioned and pressed it. Current hummed through Jessifer's frame and the beam lights of his eyes lighted dimly. There was a confused gobble-gobble in his audio, then he said, loudly and distinctly, "All things come to him who waits!"

Cap Hawkins stopped cold in his tracks; shivered like a nudist on Pluto. He said, in a tone of wan, hollow hope: "Sparks . . . didja hear that? It was all a gag. Dear ol' Uncle Lester was just kiddin'. This is his way of advisin' me how to get his fortune—"

But Jessifer was talking on, slowly, methodically, mechanically. And if his speech was advice to a credit-hungry space skipper, I'm a snail man from Sirius. There was no coherence to Jessifer's speech. It was composed of nine hundred and six adages—old saws that have been passed down through time from the quaint old jaspers of the Business Age.

"A stitch in time," Jessifer was saying, "saves nine. The early bird catches the worm. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Look before you leap. Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and—*awrk!*"

The last, friends, was not on the script. It was the fingers of Cap Hawkins clawing Jessifer back to silence.

So that, to converse in monosyllabic grunts, was that. Cap Hawkins sobbed openly for fifteen minutes. After he had sponged the salt off his leathery cheeks he decided:

"Sparks, I ain't gonna have that no-account, 'Poor Richard's Almanac,' advice-quotin' hunk of tin any place on the *Andromeda* where I can see it. I don't want it near the bridge, in my quarters, down here, or even in the galley where it would make Slops cook worse than he does. So you take it. Put it in your radio room."

I said: "Is that what you want me to do with it?"

"No," he said, "but it's too big for what ought to be done. G'wan, get it outta my sight before I decide to massage it with a blowtorch."

So I got Henderson and Jorgens to carry it up to my turret. I stood it in the corner, and in my spare time I worked on it. Since I'm not as bad an electrician as the skipper likes to pretend, I got

it into first-class working order after awhile. First-class, in this case, meaning I got the legs and arms to working so Jessifer could clump around on his own props, could fetch and carry and do all heavy, menial tasks commercial robots are supposed to do.

I found stripped wires in the televisor, replaced them, and was rewarded by finding that Jessifer's eyes could light properly again. I put a new audio needle in the sound box. That, lads and lassies, was a sad mistake. Jessifer waxed voluble. From that moment on, I became the target for the collected bromides of the centuries.

First thing in the morning, Jessifer would warn me that "Prosperity is just around the corner." What ancient dope invented that one is mankind's No. 1 prankster; a million humans have developed astigmatism trying to squint around that right angle. Then, all morning, while I was trying to earn my board and keep, Jessifer would keep up a running fire of comment to the effect that, "A rolling stone gathers no moss" and "Birds of a feather flock together."

All day long. Evidently Jessifer wasn't intelligent enough to heed one of his own adages: "Speech is silver; silence is golden."

Aside from that, he wasn't much trouble. On only one occasion did I have any trouble with him. That was one afternoon, about the tenth day out, en route to Summer City, Io, when Lieutenant Dick Todd dropped into the turret for a chat. He just about got through the portal and had waved a greeting when—

"*Pwee!*" said Jessifer.

Todd started. So did I. Jessifer's eyes, oddly, had lighted. Now, as we stared at him, his right hand began to rise. He pointed squarely at Todd's midsection, and in a faintly querulous, tinny voice said, "*Pwee!*" again.

Todd gasped, "What the hell, Sparks—"

"It's fate," I told him solemnly. "After all these years, Dick, you've finally found the one person to whom you are attractive."

"Yeah?" said Todd belligerently. "Well, wise guy, at least *one* person—"

"*Look out!*" I yelled. Because Jessifer, clucking like a thwarted mamma hen, had suddenly lurched out of his corner. His eyes glowing brighter by the second, both arms upraised, he was clump-clumping toward Todd.

Todd was pale but game. He groped in his belt for his needle gun, but I grabbed his shoulder and shoved him to the door.

"Don't ever argue," I yelled, "with a fast express or a robot. Beat it. I'll find out what's the matter with Jessifer."

But I didn't. The moment Todd hoisted gravs, the robot went to sleep in the middle of the floor. I took down his wiring but couldn't find a darned thing wrong. The only part I didn't touch was a square box in his cranium, sealed and hard-forged. I didn't take that apart because I didn't know whether I could get it back together again or not.

All this, to keep the record straight, took place while the *Andromeda* was warping space lines from Mars to Jupiter. It's a long trek for the fastest vessel, which the *Andromeda* is anything else but. The *Andromeda* was an ancient crate, built way back before the beginning of the century. It was old, slow, and leaky at the joints. It had long since been taken off the passenger service by order of the SSCB—Space Safety Control Board—and was now used only for freight transport.

Even that on sufferance. We were all hoping, from trip to trip, that the corporation would continue to let her ride the spaceways. Else we'd all be out of jobs.

So, as I say, it was about a hundred-day drag from Mars to Io. Time passed, as time has a habit of doing, and the first thing you know we were getting ready to hurdle the asteroid belt. It was about this time that Jessifer, bad luck, and the corporation officials all began acting up at the same time.

First crack out of the box, I was wakened out of a sound sleep by the irate voice of Cap Hawkins. The skipper shook me out of a swell dream, all about a blonde I know, to scream in my ear: "Sparks! Wake up, you lazy son of a space comber! Where's your watch?"

I said drowsily: "If you want to know what time it is that bad, why don't you look at a clock? There—on the night table by the bed—"

"You think so?" stormed Hawkins. "Look again!"

I looked. The table was as empty as the inside of a cloud chamber. I said: "That's funny. I put it there before I went to sleep. I don't know what—"

"I do!" snorted the skipper. "It's that confounded robot of yours."

"Oh," I said, "so he's *my* robot now?"

"He's a thievin' rascal. Last night Chief McAndrews an' I were havin'a little game of stud—"

"Now who's a thieving rascal?" I interrupted.

"Keep a civil tongue in your head, Sparks. As I was sayin', last night Chief McAndrews an' I were havin'a quiet little poker game,

when all of a sudden, that there damn robot came stalkin' into the room. He was makin' funny noises. He didn't attack me, but he walked right over to McAndrews an' jerked the wristwatch right off'n the chief's arms! Like to busted it, he did."

"If the band," I guessed, "was as tight as McAndrews, the arm probably went with the watch. So Jessifer's got time on his hands, huh? Well, what do you expect *me* to do about it?"

"Go up to your turret an' collect them watches! Yours an' McAndrews' isn't the only ones he stole. He went all over the ship last night an' collected every watch on board!"

"Then what's that thing in your vest pocket?" I demanded. "A sun dial?"

"Well . . . almost every watch. He missed mine an' the third mate's an' Doug Enderby's. Get goin', Sparks!"

So I went up to the turret, and it was just as the skipper said. Jessifer had turned ticker collector. He was standing in his customary corner, quiet as a lamb—or maybe I should say a hydraulic ram, because he had steel wool—cuddling close to his metallic bosom a round dozen watches! He was crooning to them, so help me! His eyes were glowing placidly, and he was murmuring over and over: "Bwaaa! Bwup! Bwaaa!"

I said reproachfully, "Now, Jessifer!" Whereupon his innards clacked and he said, with firm dignity, "Honesty is the best policy!"

"Check!" I said. "And birds of a feather gather no moss. Gimme! Give to papa!" But Jessifer wasn't giving out. I had to switch him off before I could take the things out of his hands.

From the doorway, the skipper watched the proceedings bitterly. "That," he pledged, "is the last straw! I'm through messin' around with that tool chest full of old saws. Tomorrow he goes out the space lock. Or maybe this afternoon. Come to think of it, what's wrong with right now?"

"Nothing," I said, "except that my radio is about to bust a vacuum tube. Stand by, skipper. Sounds like somebody's in a hurry."

Which just goes to show you how you never know the world's going to turn upside down until *bingo* there you are on the bottom.

I cut in the banks with the greatest of ease—and proceeded to get my heart broken in one simple sentence. Because it was a message from the government relay station on Pallas, and it said, curtly:

HAWKINS,
COMMANDING S. S. ANDROMEDA.

TURN ANDROMEDA, WARES, CHATTELS, EQUIPMENT OVER TO 10 METALS CORPORATION IMMEDIATELY UPON LANDING SUMMER CITY.

CHALLENGER, PRESIDENT, IPS.

You could hear my heart drop. It made a loud plunk in the room and the skipper grunted, "Well, Sparks?"

"Far," I told him mournfully, "from it." I handed him the flimsy. He read it, wailed, and dropped into a seat, pawing his grizzled pate wildly.

"Sold down the river! After all these years, sold down the river, Sparks!"

Well, that's corporation gratitude for you. I was a young man. I'd find another job—eventually. But Hawkins was an old spacehound, just barely hanging on. If the *Andromeda* were sold, he'd never get another command. He'd get a watchman's job on a Lunar outpost, maybe, or be transferred to lightship duty on one of the planetoids. I said: "Wait a minute, Cap. Sit tight. I'll see what I can find out."

I switched the verniers to the eight-plus band and contacted Bud Murphy, the Pallas operator, on a private wave length. I tapped out, "Just got the official notice, Murphy. What's the low-down?"

"The *Andromeda* has been sold, Bert," he shot back, "to the Ionian freight shuttle. You and the gang are ordered back to Earth."

"It's a long walk," I reminded him.

"The *Spica* is standing by to pick you up. It was Murphy transmitting, all right, but somehow it didn't sound like his fingers. You get to know bug-pounding styles after a while. I knew Murphy was embarrassed and sympathetic, but didn't want to make me feel too bad. He ended up: "Somebody cutting our wave, Bert. So long, and—chingo regrejimmo!"

Which is Universal for "damned sorry, pal!" but it didn't do us much good. I turned again to the skipper.

"Isn't there anything we can do, Cap?"

He shook his head. "Nope. We've lifted graves for the last time, Sparks, on the *Andromeda*."

"But maybe they'll change their minds—"

"Wishful thinkin', Sparks. The corporation has only altered a decision once in the past twenty years. That was when old Cap Lafferty, after bein' ordered to scuttle the *Explorer II* in the

Sargossa, came lumberin' home triumphant with a space claim on a diamond-dust asteroid." The skipper rose slowly. His shoulders sagged. He'd aged five years in as many minutes. "Well . . . that's the end, my boy. I wish it coulda been different, but—What did you say?"

"Nothing. It was him," I answered apologetically.

And Jessifer repeated his ill-inspired adage in a louder voice. It was the worst example of poor taste I ever heard from a robot.

"Easy come, easy go!" he quoted.

Well, life on the *Andromeda* was never what you might call a three-ring circus. And the long hauls, like the Mars-to-Io jump, were always monotonous. But I never knew a trip to be so dismal as were the next few days of that trek.

The skipper was one big hunk of melancholy dressed in officer's blues as he guided the *Andromeda* out of the plane of the ecliptic, hurdling the asteroid belt to avoid collision with one of those countless millions of frozen rocks swarming around the Sun between Mars and Jupiter. His gloom communicated itself to the rest of the brevetmen; there were times when the officers mess was as light-hearted and gay as the receiving room of an abattoir.

The crew, even without being told, sensed something was wrong. In an effort to liven things up, without being ordered to do so, they went to work and housecleaned the *Andromeda* from tip to base. I tell you, the old lugger simply shone. Which was heart-breaking in itself. It looked like a shiny new coffin being delivered to the mortician's clip joint.

The only cheerful voice in an atmosphere of deadly monotony was that of my canned companion, Jessifer. He made my life miserable with his interminable rumblings of sage advice.

"Be good, and you'll be happy," he said one night for no apparent reason while I was playing solitaire.

I started guiltily and moved the queen of diamonds back where I'd taken it from. Then I realized it was Jessifer making with the antique chromos.

"Be good," I snarled back at him, "and you'll be *sappy*! I wish you were stuffed with tomato juice instead of wires, wheels and advice."

"'Tis better to have loved and lost," returned my perambulating hardware store stolidly, "than never to have loved at—*Pwee!*"

"*Pfui, yourself!*" I said. Then I squinted at him anxiously, recognizing symptoms. Because his eyes had begun to light up

again with that same glow that had limned them when he made a pass at Dick Todd and went on his one-robot timekeeping expedition. "Hey, you!" I said.

The glow became brighter. And, "Bwaaa!" Jessifer rasped. "*Bwaaa! Bwup! Bwaaa!*"

I jammed in the audio and yelled at Cap Hawkins on the bridge: "Hey, skipper, call out the reserves. The adage machine is on the loose again!"

"Disconnect the damn thing!" ordered the chief. I turned to do so, but it was too late. For Jessifer, getting louder, if not funnier, by the split second, had roused from his corner. His right hand was pointing over my head; his eyes were shining like sealed-beam headlights, and he was on the move. For the doorway!

I let loose a frightened squawk and hightailed it after him. But it was no use. Did you ever chase a robot? It's like pursuing a meteor in a kiddie car. I matched him step for step, but his steps were twice as long as mine and ten times as noisy. Not that the *clumpety-clump* disturbed my eardrums. I could hardly hear it for the greater din he was perpetrating with his audio-diaphragm as the "*pwee*" sound had given way to the "*bwaaa*," now the "*bwaaa*" had been supplanted by a wild, exuberant bellow.

"Whorroooo!" Jessifer was howling as he sped up the corridor and turned into the ramp that led to the bridge. "Whorroo! oooooo!"

Cap Hawkins heard us coming. Why not? He stepped to the door of the control cabin and took one frightened eyeful. "Turn off the siren, Sparks!" he yelled. "What the blue space do you—"

Then Jessifer breezed past him so fast that ozone crackled around the skipper. Right into the control room. He paused there for a moment in the middle of the floor, as if orienting himself. His body turned, his right arm jabbed skyward and to the starboard declension line. "Whorrooooo!" he bleated.

"Crazy!" yelled Hawkins. "A crazy robot! That is a fine gift. Bless my uncle Lester!"

"Beware the Greeks," I told him, "bearing a gift horse in the mouth. Don't stare at me, skipper. I got that way listening to Jessifer. What's he up to now?"

For Jessifer, as if his mechanical brain were finally settled on some obscure point, had suddenly stalked to the navigator's seat. With steely deftness he picked up Lieutenant Todd and thrust him out of the way. Then he sat down in the seat; his fingers groped for the control keys.

Cap Hawkins shouted: "Migod, don't let him touch those

controls! We're right in the middle of the asteroids. He'll crack us up, sure as—" And his hand groped for the pistol in his belt.

And then, folks, something clicked in my brain. I suddenly experienced that phenomenon known technically as an "idea." What's more, it made sense.

I grabbed the skipper's arm, jerked it aside just in time to save the howling Jessifer from becoming a heap of fused rubbish. "Stop, Cap!" I yelled. "Let him alone; It's all right!"

Hawkins turned shocked eyes upon me. "Now *you've* gone crazy, too, Sparks? Well, by golly, I'll hafta lick the two of you. I ain't gonna lose this ship without a fight."

But I wrenched the pistol from his hands. "He who fights," I told him, "and pulls his freight, will live to fight some other date. Skipper, everything's going to be all right, I tell you. More than that—"

Just then, Jessifer found the combination he'd been seeking. The ship lurched and slithered, everything movable slid, topsy-turvy, all over the room. Chairs and charts, inkwells and slide rules and miscellany started raining upon us like Gargantuan confetti. Cap Hawkins' gobboon, which hadn't been emptied for about three days, was now violently emptied scant inches from the skipper's locks. The control cabin audio began to clamor with the outraged howls of men in other parts of the ship. I recognized the voice of Doug Enderby calling plaintive queries from the mess hall; Chief McAndrews added a few choice epithets from the engine room. I collared the skipper and forced him through the doorway; Todd was on our heels.

"It's mutiny!" bawled Hawkins as soon as he got his breath back. "Grab Sparks, Todd! He's gone nuts! It's insubordination!"

"It's nothing of the kind," I retorted. "It's genius cropping out in me. Listen, Cap—and make it a serious listen. Am I right in thinking that whenever a ship is sold, intracosmic law gives the commander the right to buy the ship on option at the price of the highest bid?"

"So you're still sane?" demanded the skipper. "Or are you? Yeah, that's right. So what? The *Andromeda* prob'bly cost the Io company about a hundred thousand credits. I ain't got anything like that amount, an' if I had, I wouldn't waste it on a wallowin' old crate that's just about to be cracked up on an asteroid!"

"Then come along!" I yelled gleefully. "Come on up to my turret. We're going to buy this lugger right *now* while it's still legitimate to do so! Come on!"

I turned and streaked up the companionway, while the *Andromeda* continued to lurch and wobble. I thought Hawkins and Todd were following me; Todd confessed later that what they were really doing was chasing me. They thought—and not without reason—I'd slipped my gravs.

But as we ran, I talked, and as I talked, their two mouths dropped open. By the time we had reached the radio room, Cap Hawkins was more eager to start sending that message than I was. I sent it. And the ship settled down; a dragging told that she had approached some object in space and taken it in tow. An answer came back from the Lunar outpost of the IPS:

CORPORATION FORCED TO APPROVE SALE OF
ANDROMEDA TO COMMANDING OFFICER HAWKINS AT
SALES PRICE NINETY-THREE THOUSAND CREDITS,
EARTH EXCHANGE.

Then, querulously, an afterthought from the fingers of Operator Joe Marlowe:

BUT WHY, BERT? YOU CAN BUY COFFEE IN BETTER
CANS THAN THE ANDROMEDA.

And all the time, from the bridge came that constant, ear-splitting howl of Jessifer. "*Whorrooo! Whorrooo! Gwup!*"

Then the radio-room door burst open, and in barged Chief Engineer McAndrews, a hundred and forty pounds of anger and curiosity.

"If ye'd be so kind, Captain Hawkins," he demanded, "would ye explain to me the idea of this nonsense? We take a headlong dive into the asteroid belt. We risk our necks. We slow down and take something in tow—"

Hawkins beamed like a solar-energy mirror and yipped: "Congratulate me, you bowlegged old Scotchman! I've just bought the *Andromeda*."

"Congrat—" McAndrews' face looked like a patchwork quilt. Then a vast sorrow crept into his eyes. "I was afeared o' this! Too much strain and worry. Now, captain, if ye'll lie down and rest awhile—"

"He hasn't cracked up, chief," I grinned. "He did buy the *Andromeda*."

"But . . . but why?"

"If you'll look out the aft perils, I suggested, "you'll find out. The skipper, in buying the *Andromeda* before we assumed new cargo, became sole owner of whatever property the spaceship

salvaged subsequently. Therefore, that miniature mountain we're towing on our traction beam belongs to *us*, not to the corporation. And unless I'm wrong, and Jessifer is a lousy bloodhound, and Uncle Lester—bless him!—was off his button, that mountain is pure pitchblende!"

Afterward, when Dick Todd had gone out in his bulger and proven, by analysis, my hunch to be correct; afterward, as we continued our journey on to Io feeling like the crew of bloated plutocrats we soon would be, Chief Engineer McAndrews insisted that the loose ends be tied up for his information.

"I'm not saying," he said cannily, "that it wasna a gude stroke o' business. But I'd still like to know whyfore and how come."

Cap Hawkins looked at me so affectionately that I blushed. "You tell him, Sparks. You're the hero."

"Not me," I corrected. "Jessifer was the hero and Uncle Lester was the brains. I was just the go-between who happened to guess the right answer."

"We were all pretty dumb not to see the meaning in the first place. The way I figure it, just before his death, Uncle Lester must have discovered that his supposedly 'vast' fortune was not as great—or would not be as great—as was reckoned—"

Cap Hawkins interrupted, nodding: "That's right. Now I remember that Uncle Lester told me once that his affairs were tied up in non-transferable credits. Still, it was a shock to get only an old-fashioned robot as a legacy."

"Anyway," I continued, "Uncle Lester wanted to leave the skipper some substantial proof of his affection. He knew the skipper was a spaceman. He knew, also, that in space there floats incalculable wealth for the man who is fortunate enough to find it. So he constructed, or had someone construct for him—Jessifer!"

"We should have guessed Jessifer's real purpose when we read Uncle Lester's letter. The wording had to be veiled so that, in the event Jessifer fell into strange hands, he would not be stolen. But the clues were there. You remember that Uncle Lester said, 'The voice of Jessifer beside you in space should lead you to *glowing* contentment'? And he also mentioned 'the same kind of happiness that has lightened my life.' That is—wealth."

"Moreover, if you'll analyze the name 'Jessifer' you will find that it means 'bearer of wealth'—"

McAndrews nodded sagely.

"I see. Wealth . . . 'glowing' . . . he meant that Jessifer was an animated radium finder, is that it?"

“Precisely. We’ve seen by his performance that he was built by a man of genius. When I had him apart, I saw a strange cube in his head. Undoubtedly this activated him whenever radium was anywhere within a certain range.”

“We had several hints as to his ability, but were not smart enough to guess the solution. The time he stole all the watches but Enderby’s, Wilson’s and the skippers. Now we realize that these were the only three watches aboard that did *not* have radium-illuminated numerals. And the time he ‘attacked’ Todd, he was performing his natural function: going toward the radioactive charge in Todd’s needle gun.”

“And the ‘voice’ that Uncle Lester mentioned: that is Jessifer’s habit of peeping, yelling or howling whenever radium is in the neighborhood. The volume of sound is determined by the amount of radium.”

Cap Hawkins grinned from ear to ear.

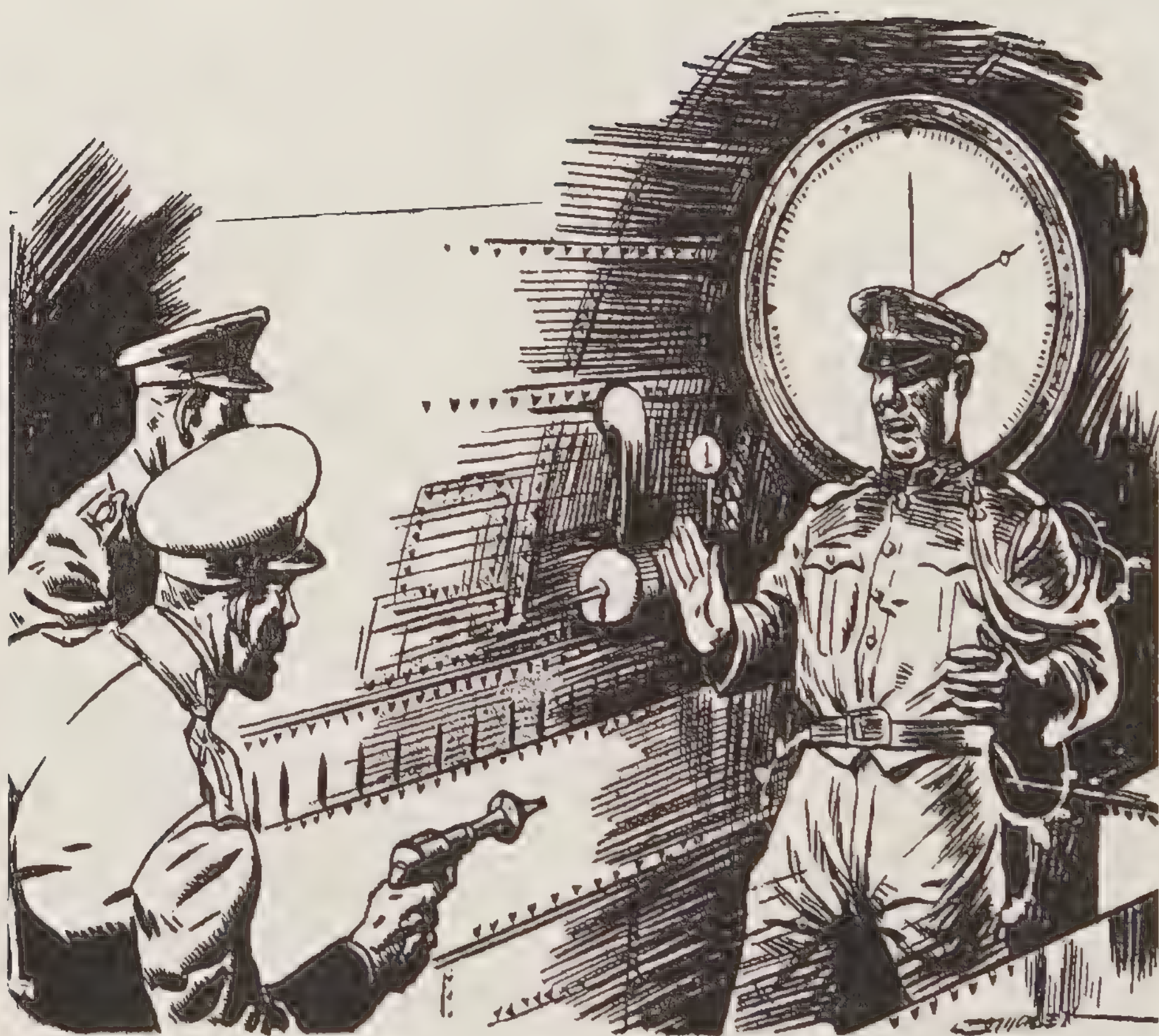
“An’ that’s the answer, boys. Well . . . now we own a spaceship. An’ we’re gonna have enough left over to go into business for ourselves—with Jessifer as robot first mate. But—” A sudden frown creased his forehead. “But, Sparks, I just thought of somethin’. Jessifer’s other mode of talkin’. Them everlastin’, damn maxims he spouts. Why—”

I grinned right back at him. It’s nice to realize that at last you’re independent of a credit-conscious outfit like the corporation; are slated for a steady berth under a competent old spacedog like Cap Hawkins. I said thoughtfully: “Well, now, skipper . . . I think maybe Uncle Lester figured you could profit by some of that ancient wisdom. I’ve come to the conclusion that Jessifer *never* makes a mistake. And by some strange quirk of his mechanism, he usually manages to quote some proverb with a direct bearing on the conversation— Eh, what’s that?”

Jessifer’s eyes were glowing pleasantly. He said again, louder this time and meaningfully, “Empty barrels make the most noise!”

So everybody laughed. So I shut up. And I kicked Jessifer. It didn’t hurt him, but my foot’s still in bandages. Oh, well—what do you expect from a robot?







Luxury Liner

When Captain Lynch Took Off From Earth on
a Pleasure Cruise, He Didn't Bargain on
Mutiny and Deadly Peril to Spoil the Fun!

CHAPTER I

On the Spot

THE SHIP'S CLOCK BONGED TWICE UNOBTRUSIVELY. Which was, thought Lieutenant Kirk McCrae, first officer of the *Bluebell*, just the trouble around here. Every darned thing aboard this triple-blanked, pride-o'-the-fleet, super-extra deluxe luxury liner was either unobtrusive, upholstered or fattening!

"Grrmmph!" he said, glaring at the dial.

His fingers pressed lock-studs on the control banks before him. He lifted his six-foot frame out of the bucket-shaped pilot's seat and stalked, stiff-legged, to the chart-table. Space, mirrored in the turret visilens, was a flame-flecked pall. McCrae's mood, mirrored in his sultry eyes, was blacker still, and equally lighted with rebellious flares.

He tortured the keys of the mechanical log-recorder, scowled at the neat row of figures that popped out of its roller.

"Grrmmph!" he said again.

His sole companion on the bridge, third Mate Johnny Arbogast, grinned up at him from behind the Calc desk.

"Matter, pal? Got the meemies?"

"So bad," growled McCrae, "I could holler. Blast it, Johnny,

this trip's getting me down! Look at my hands!" he extended them.

"Soap?" Arbogast suggested.

"Nerves, you dope! I used to say I didn't have one in my carcass. But now I can feel them wriggling around in me like a skinful of hot angleworms! Next thing you know, they'll be measuring me for a strait-jacket."

"Notch," asked Arbogast interestedly, "or peak lapels?" He propped his feet on the desk, lighted a cigarette. "Why all the fuss. Kirk? This is an easy berth. Short hours, cozy quarters, good grub, and the sweetest, best-equipped spaceship that ever lifted gravs. What's the squawk?"

"You've just named it," fumed McCrae. "It's *too* darn soft. It's not the hours on duty I mind. It's the hours of leisure. Piddling around like somebody's pet pup with a mob of soft-pawed, wide-eyed Earth lubbers—"

"Comes," said Arbogast softly, "the dawn! In words of one syllable—it's not the heat, it's the humility? You don't burst into spasms of joy over our beloved passengers?"

"I'm a spaceman," glowered McCrae. "I'd a darn sight rather be running pirate patrol in the Belt or tending lightship off Pluto than striking poses for a crateful of amateur stereoptographers."

"And their blithering chatter! And the way I have to ooze goo at them! 'Yes, indeedy, Dr. Gotgelt, that huge, shiny thing out there is the sun.' 'Oh, no, Mrs. Richfish that's not a comet! It's a cosmic firefly on a bust'—*Bah!*"

Arbogast grinned consolingly.

"I see what you mean. They do get in your hair, don't they? But cheer up. We'll be home in another six weeks."

"In six more weeks," said McCrae bitterly, "I'll be in the paper-doll business."

He moved to the turret bulletin board, disdainfully fingered a gaudy sheet tacked thereon.

"'Enjoy three glorious months of Vagabondia,'" he read, "'on the luxury liner *Bluebell*, Pride of the Spaceways. See Luna, Venus, Mercury, Mars! Thrill to the Magic of the Universe. Beauty! Romance! Adventure! All for C2,9858—with meals!'"

"Three thousand credits!" sighed Arbogast. "Think of it. A year's wages!"

McCrae gave a snort.

"Not to Mr. and Mrs. Moneybags! It's just another snip with the coupon scissors to them. Anyway, listen to what they get for their greenbacks."

"'Roam the Caverns of ancient Luna, home of a Vanished

Race, under the protection of stalwart guides supplied (at a nominal fee) by the Luna Tours Co., Inc. Stroll through the lush jungles of Venus, thrilling to the spectacle of Mother Nature, working in a virgin laboratory to create new and strange life-forms—’”

“Hi-yah, Mom!” Arbogast snickered.

“—and from the air-conditioned observation chambers of Mercury’s famed Outpost, dare the flaming majesty of the sun. Gaze with awe upon its tempestuous prominences and see the unparalleled glory of the Corona—’”

“—and don’t forget,” added Johnny Arbogast, “to buy native pottery and souvenir postcards at Ye Olde Mercurian Trading Poste! Stop it, Kirk; you’re breaking my heart. Maybe this trip *is* a dud, after all.”

“So what? We can’t quit in midflight. Anyhow—” He brightened. “All the passengers aren’t dull, sickening clucks. There are a couple of neat-looking tabbies on board. That Lansing gal, for instance. *She’s* no nuisance.”

“Well, she’s different,” McCrae nodded grudgingly.

“Wrong again, pal. She’s the same thing, only in a bubblier package. Anyhow, I thought you thought so—if you know what I mean. And Miss Wright? Old Man Preston’s kid?”

“*Phew!*”

“Not polite,” reproved Arbogast, but accurate. Well, how about the tour nurse? Eileen O’Hara?”

“That red-headed snip?” McCrae flushed with sudden ire. “If there’s anything I hate, it’s an efficient woman!”

“Yeah?” Arbogast stared at him curiously. “I used to think you liked her. She’s O.Q. for my bucks, Bud.”

“Then you can have her! Furthermore,” snarled Kirk McCrae with unreasonable vehemence, “I’ll throw in practically everybody else aboard this plush-and-chromium space mangler! With the exception of yourself and Travers, the fourth officer, and Doc Bishop, and Sparks and Miss Lansing and—and maybe Chief Engineer McGinty, the rest can take a flying gallop through the air lock!”

“Moreover, I include our windbag skipper and our Fancy-Dan second mate, Ronnie del Morgan. What’s ailing you, chum? Got termites?”

Johnny Arbogast made no answer. His face was frozen into an impossible grimace, a smile half of greeting, half of warning. A finger at his side made jerking motions. A silence settled over the bridge; in that silence, McCrae turned slowly. And:

“Please proceed, Lieutenant!” puffed Captain Lynch. “Your conversation is *most* interesting!”

* * *

The skipper of the *Bluebell* was a short man, but he looked somewhat taller now, standing as he was on his not inconsiderable dignity. His eyes were as frigidly genial as those of a deep-sea fish; his cheeks the approximate tint of a well-done lobster. Behind him, graceful and poised even in this embarrassing moment, stood the debonair second mate, del Morgan.

His voice was smoothly and delicately vituperative.

"Well, McCrae! A fine example of professional courtesy! Discussing your superior officers behind their backs!"

"Officer," said McCrae. "Not 'officers.' I'm sorry, Captain Lynch. I shouldn't have said what I did. I guess I let my tongue run away with me. I apologize, sir."

"Apologize!" bridled the skipper. "Indeed you will! And explain, too. Before a meeting of the Board. As soon as we get home. 'Windbag', eh? We'll see who's a—but never mind! May I ask, Lieutenant, why you're not at the controls? Insubordination I can handle, but neglect of duty—"

"I finished my trick ten minutes ago, sir," Kirk McCrae said quietly. "I cannot be held responsible for the failure of my relief to take over."

"Mr. del Morgan," said the skipper, "was assisting me with—*hrrumph!*—passenger duties. Another department of official routine in which, I might add, sir, you have been noticeably deficient. As a matter of fact, Mr. McCrae, I've seen very little in either your performance of duties or your attitude to warrant your holding the brevet of first officer of this ship! Windbag! Windbag, indeed!"

"I repeat my apology, sir—" McCrae began.

"Silence, please!" Lynch fondled his soft, pinkish jowls, pondering. He thought aloud and ominously. "I *could* lift your rocket, Lieutenant, for mutinous criticism of your captain. Or it is within my power to confine you to quarters. But—"

He looked up, nodding, decision in his eyes.

"But I am minded to overlook the whole incident."

"Thank you, sir! It is very generous of you—"

"A moment, sir! I shall overlook the whole, unhappy incident—on one condition! That from now on, there shall be a marked change in your attitude toward those on whom we of the Fleet are dependent. In short, sir—our passengers!"

Kirk McCrae swallowed his grimace.

"Very good, sir. I will do everything within my power—"

"And to further this aim," purred the skipper, "you are hereby removed from active bridge duties until further notice—and are

assigned to the post of special guide!”

“*G-guide!*” McCrae strangled on the word. And stared at his captain agonizedly. “But, Skipper, I can’t—”

“Of course,” persisted Captain Lynch, “if you should refuse to assume this post, I should be forced to consider your refusal final proof of your insubordination, and—I beg pardon?”

“N-nothing, sir,” McCrae gulped.

“So? Well, then, your duties begin immediately. I have long felt that the regular guide, Mr. Masterson, is too deeply burdened with details. Tomorrow, when we cradle at Mars Central, you will work with him. Make necessary arrangements for trips, accommodations and so forth. I believe some of our guests wish to make the side-shuttle journey to Phobos.”

“‘Five wonder-filled hours on the solar system’s oddest satellite.’ You remember. Lieutenant?”

“Ugh!” said McCrae.

Captain Lynch eyed him balefully.

“Still others are planning the overnight camel trip to Grand Oasis. And I understand one small party wishes to view the marvels of Erosion Natural Park. Of course, you are not expected to be in all these places at once. But you will prepare the schedules, see to it that the passengers are well provided for, happy, comfortable, pleasantly entertained.”

“I—I—” began McCrae wildly.

It was on the tip of his tongue to bid the Old Man go chase Ampies up a rocket-jet. Then sudden understanding seized him. Lynch was not loading this onerous task on him purposelessly. Lynch realized that no Advisory Board would “break” a spaceman merely because he had criticized a superior.

He also knew that by reporting McCrae for such a trifle, he would expose himself to ridicule.

Nor could the skipper “throw the book” at his first mate without subjecting his own bridge generalship to close scrutiny. He was, therefore, making deliberate effort to corral Kirk McCrae’s goat, hoping McCrae would blow up and commit some open breach of discipline.

But this, thought McCrae with sudden determination, was just what he would *not* do! Captain Lynch was caught in a mesh of his own devising. If Kirk McCrae assumed this job, performed it satisfactorily, the captain was bound by his own terms to forget his recent gripe.

McCrae’s record would remain spotless.

“You were saying—” prompted Lynch hopefully.

First Officer Kirk McCrae squared his shoulders.

"Nothing, sir. I just said, 'Aye!' Aye, *aye*, sir!"

Johnny Arbogast's breath escaped in a heartfelt sigh of relief. Lieutenant del Morgan sniffed insolently. Lynch's pudgy hands toyed fretfully with the gold braid that was on his jacket front.

"Very well, McCrae. You will assume your duties at once. The passengers await entertainment. Go below and start a game of—of deck tennis, or something."

"Very good, sir!" said McCrae quietly. And he left the bridge. He had gained, he felt, a moral victory. But at what price? He hardly knew whether to grin or groan!

CHAPTER II

Fool's Play

Twenty-four hours later, Kirk McCrae was no longer in doubt. Face contorted in a meaningless smile, he stood beside Heyward Masterson, the official tour conductor, helping the passengers descend the ladder ramp from the moored *Bluebell* to the sandy soil of Mars Central Spaceport.

One by one the members of the cruise party emerged. They were an oddly assorted lot. First, Dr. and Mrs. Raymond Tomlinson, a silver-haired couple in their sixties. Second, honeymooners: eager, excited, volubly interested in every new sight. If all tourists were like this grand old pair, McCrae decided, this might not be such a filthy job.

But they weren't. The next pair to come down were the T. Frazier Joneses. She, looking disdainful and bored; he, looking sulky and—as usual—more than half drunk.

Next came the Wrights: old J. Preston himself, vice-president of the Fleet, crabbed, testy, demanding; his meek-and-mousy wife; and their daughter, Susan, ash-blond and beautiful in a vacuous, beauty-parlorish sort of way.

"A cultured pearl," muttered McCrae, "with adenoids."

"What's that, young man?" snarled Old Man Preston.

"Nothing, sir," said McCrae stolidly. "Careful, sir. Watch the step, sir."

They passed on. A cool, amused voice spun the young lieutenant around.

"You'd better watch your step, Lieutenant. You mutter much too loudly, you know."

"Oh, you?" McCrae grunted. "Go peddle your pills, redhead!"

"That's the nice part of being a tour nurse," Eileen O'Hara laughed. "I don't peddle 'em; I give 'em away. What will you have? A headache tablet? I think you could use one."

"A truckload," McCrae growled, "if you're going to hang around here."

"Beat it, won't you? I'm very busy!" He leaped forward suddenly. "Ah, good morning, Miss Lansing! Sleep well? Lovely day, isn't it? Watch the step."

Gloria Lansing posed briefly, tellingly, at the ramp top, touched a faultless coiffure with scarlet-tipped fingers, and made a great occasion of inhaling her first breath of the thin, cool Martian air. She wore a desert sun-suit conceived by an expensive Earth *couturiere*. Abbreviated shorts and a low-necked, diaphanous sports shirt made little pretense at concealing her breath-taking charms.

Across the space port, a cargo crew stopped working; one uninhibited male animal signified enthusiasm in a low, appreciative whistle. Kirk McCrae frowned and flushed, but Gloria Lansing smiled. Her voice was the chiming of old crystal.

"Lovely, Lieutenant? Marvelous, rather! Glorious! Ah—Mars! Earth's gorgeous sister planet. What beauty—what charm—what promise of adventure and romance!"

Her long-lashed eyes met McCrae's briefly, dizzyingly; then she passed on. Behind McCrae sounded an unladylike snort.

"What ham acting!" gurgled Eileen O'Hara. "And what malarkey! 'Earth's sister planet', your Aunt Isabel! What's happened to Venus? Gosh, I wish I had glamour!"

"I wish you had a bridle!" snapped McCrae. "You're envious, redhead. Why don't you run along somewhere and hide?"

"Sure I'm envious," acknowledged Eileen cheerfully. "Trouble with me is, I can't wear clothes like that, I blush, and look sun-burned. As for running along—no can do, Lieutenant. I'm your personal leech. You and I are assigned to shepherd the flock to Phobos—or hadn't you heard?"

Kirk McCrae stared. "You and I? Working together?"

"Mmm-hmm. Just one, big, happy murder method—no?"

"Yes," corrected McCrae. "O.Q., my delightful, brick-topped vial of poison. But I'm running this she-bang. And I don't want any comments, cracks or advice out of you, get it? I'm tired of efficient females. You go your way—"

"—and you'll make passes at the glorious Gloria," finished Eileen. "I get it." Her green eyes were taunting. "Oh, by the way—about those headache tablets—"

"I don't need any," said McCrae curtly. "Go 'way!"

"You don't," said Eileen, "but *I* do. 'Bye!"

The last passengers filed from the ship: Henderson, a Lunar utilities magnate, and his secretary, a wan-looking yes-man named Sanders; Dr. Charles Gruber, the biologist, and his wife; Miss Hester Priddy, an old-maid schoolteacher; a Mrs. Ormond Hearn, recently widowed and taking this cruise to forget her grief; Mrs. Lacey Trent-Weatherby, a three-time diplomatic corps widow, currently between mates.

A pair of younger men. Joe Chickering, who blithely called himself a professional ne'er-do-well, and a young musician, Rudy Galatzino. Pete O'Brien, plump, squat, cheerful and grateful to the forces of law and order that had closed his bucket-shop, sending him on this vacation.

Masterson, the head tour conductor, checked the last name, turned to McCrae.

"Now, Lieutenant, about this afternoon's trip—"

McCrae held up his hand.

"Was she telling the truth?" he demanded.

"Miss O'Hara? Why, yes. You see, a nurse is needed on the Phobos trip. Grav-nausea, you know. Phobos is tiny—"

"Draw me," McCrae interrupted caustically, "a diagram. So I'm elected to lead that expedition, eh? Well, all right. How many passengers are going along?"

"Well, let me see. Dr. and Mrs. Tomlinson, Miss Priddy, the Wrights, Mr. Chickering, Miss Lansing."

"Yeah?" McCrae's eyes lighted.

"And I believe Lieutenant del Morgan expressed his intention of making the trip also. There will be eleven altogether." Masterson coughed ingratiatingly. "I'm glad you're assisting me, Lieutenant. My job has been no easy one, trying to take care of everything. With you handling the Phobos party, I am free to spend my time with the overnight caravan."

"Think nothing of it."

"You will of course take every precaution for safety Lieutenant. Phobos is an interesting satellite, but has its perils. The chasms, the lack of gravity, the—"

"—nurses," finished McCrae, "and pretty spacemen who tag along. O.Q. I'll bring 'em back alive. When do we go?"

"After lunch. The ferry will be at Number Nine Cradle. If I don't see you before you take off—good luck, Lieutenant!"

McCrae, watching Gloria Lansing disappear into the foyer of the Spaceport Inn, came to with a start.

"Huh? Oh, yeah—thanks!"

* * *

Miss Gloria Lansing was used to having her own way. She was not having it now. She didn't like the experience. A smile was on her lips, but sultriness clouded her eyes.

"Oh, now. Lieutenant!" she pleaded for the hundredth time. "Don't be a meanie! Just once? For a teeny minute?"

Kirk McCrae sighed. Things were not going exactly as he had planned. He had looked forward to this trip as a sort of five-hour chance of a lifetime, with the Lansing chick and himself in the starring roles. It had not turned out so. He had been plagued, all during the ferry shuttle from Mars to Phobos, with innumerable queries cooked up by the tourist adventurers. Now that they were on the satellite, he was being pestered by every member of the party—including the gorgeous Gloria herself—to do things not permitted.

"I'm sorry. Miss Lansing," he said, "but it's absolutely forbidden. I realize that lead-soled walkers are a bore. But on this tiny moon, the gravitation is so slight that if you were to remove them you'd soar skyward every time you took a step."

The girl's ripe lips puckered into a bewitching pout.

"But I know, Lieutenant! That's just why I want to try it. I want to experience the lovely sensation of flight. To feel myself—" She spread her arms dramatically. "To lift like a bird in the violet sky—"

"No!" said McCrae curtly.

Miss Lansing glared at him witheringly and moved away. Lieutenant del Morgan, turning to follow her paused to look back.

"You didn't have to be so darned nasty about it!" he snapped.

"Beat it!" said McCrae wearily. "Go fall down a chasm, will you, camera-pan? And pull the hole in after you."

The second mate glared at him.

"I made the suggestion for your own good. Miss Lansing is a passenger, and entitled to every respect and courtesy. Captain Lynch will not be pleased to hear of your dictatorial attitude."

"And he'll hear," grunted McCrae, "as soon as you can chase home and tell him. You know, del Morgan, sometimes I'm tempted to lay an egg on that pretty puss of yours."

He took a half step forward. The other man backed on in swift alarm.

"Now, none of that, McCrae! Regulations forbid brawling between space officers."

"What's all this, gentlemen?"

The crabbed snarl of J. Preston Wright interrupted the first

pleasant moment Kirk McCrae had enjoyed for hours. Reluctantly, McCrae watched del Morgan scuttle away after Gloria Lansing. Then he forced a smile.

"Just horseplay, sir. What can I do for you?"

"Horseplay, eh? Wright *hrrumphed!* scornfully. "Well, we'll have no more of it. Not while I'm a vice-president of the Fleet. Lieutenant, how much time have we left?"

McCrae glanced at his wrist-chronometer.

"Trifle less than an hour, sir."

"Then suppose you earn your keep by taking us on a little stroll across the plains, sir? We've looked at Mars through the telescopes, listened to an illustrated lecture on Phobian flora and fauna, and practically bought out a souvenir shop. But we haven't seen any of the 'romance and glamour' we were supposed to see here. Show us, Lieutenant!"

McCrae was frank. "There isn't much to show. After all, Phobos is only thirteen miles in diameter. It's pretty much the same everywhere you look."

"This side-trip, complained Wright, "cost ten credits!"

"I didn't write the folder, sir," McCrae reminded him.

"You're guiding the expedition. Now those ravines, for instance."

Wright pointed across the desolate Phobian plain to dark, scarred pits.

"Aren't they supposed to be one of the natural wonders? Couldn't we climb down?"

"Oh, no!" McCrae shook his head determinedly. "That won't do, sir. There are still crawlers on this satellite."

"Crawlers!" piped up Susan Wright, wide-eyed. "Oh, Papa, the monsters we saw in the stereo-optographers! We must see them!"

"But they're dangerous, sir!" McCrae protested weakly. "And we've very little time left."

"Time enough," grunted Wright, "to walk to the head of the ravine. Lieutenant, are you going to fulfill your duty as an escort, or must I report to Captain Lynch that—"

"Very well, sir," McCrae sighed and surrendered. "I'll call the others. But when we reach the ravine, please move carefully. Dr. Tomlinson, Miss Priddy, Mr. Chickering—"

A few minutes later, the members of the tourist party were trudging across the hard, cracked plain to the ravine. In lead-weighted walkers, it was an arduous trip. The line was a long, straggling one. McCrae was at its head. His attention was occu-

pied with answering a new deluge of silly questions. That explains why he did not notice what was happening some yards to the rear.

Gloria Lansing had fallen behind the main body of the group. She was weary of the plodding pace. Moreover, she was angry. She was accustomed to having her own way. And McCrae's back was turned—

She glanced about her covertly. No one was looking. She dropped to one knee, unbuckled the straps of one walker, then the other. She rose to her feet tentatively, a feeling of giddy lightness suffusing her. Even the slightest movement lifted her to the balls of her feet. She essayed a step, felt her whole body rise and glide. It was a strange, wild, altogether pleasant sensation. If she were to leap, now, she would rise and skim like a bird.

"Look, everybody!" she cried aloud gaily. "Watch me!"

McCrae spun, startled. His eyes read the situation at a glance. The abandoned weights, the dramatic posture of the girl, the smooth tensing of her unencumbered limbs.

"*Don't!*" he roared. "Miss Lansing—*don't do it!*"

But even as he shouted—she leaped. Her laughter was gay, carefree. The Phobian lack of gravity had stripped her weight to a mere nothingness. Her leap carried her high over the heads of the group, like a flash of vibrant, colorful thistledown. Then, lightly, she began to fall.

It was then that her laughter ended abruptly in a scream. Her arms waved wildly; her limbs threshed the air in a vain attempt to find solidity. Too late she understood what McCrae had known and feared. Her leap had supplied too much impetus. She would not land beside her companions, but beyond them! In the depths of the dark ravine!

Once more and piercingly she screamed. Then she was over the rim, a whirling, tumbling, frightened girl. McCrae, plunging forward desperately, was just in time to see her plummet headlong to the rubble-strewn floor of the chasm.

"Miss Lansing!" he cried. "Gloria!"

There came no answer. Shock or fear or actual hurt had stilled her. She lay there at the bottom of the ravine limp, motionless.

CHAPTER III

Disaster

For a moment Kirk McCrae stared, grimly indecisive. Then his

hands leaped to the lacings of his own boots. But even as they fought the rawhide, his eyes glimpsed movement in the shadows below. His hands stopped. He rose swiftly, barring the forward-pressing passage of the others.

"Back!" he cried. "Stay back! del Morgan—quickly! Hop back to the depot for a rope. Hurry!"

The second officer stared at him.

"Rope? Are you insane? There's a quicker way to get her out of there than that!"

He bent, his hands tugging at his boot lacings. McCrae gripped his shoulder, spun him to his feet.

"Do as I say, del Morgan! Get rope! I'm going after her."

"When?" snarled del Morgan. "When you're satisfied she's learned her lesson? She's hurt, you idiot! She needs attention right now!"

He tugged himself free, kicked off his weighted boots—and before McCrae could stop him, had hurled himself over the brink after the girl!

Impotent with rage and apprehension, McCrae watched him float downward. His eyes swung to the group, seeking assistance.

"Chickering—" he began.

But Eileen O'Hara had already doffed her weights. Now the nurse said calmly, coolly:

"I'll get rope, Kirk. Go down. They'll need you. I'll do what's necessary—up here."

There was complete understanding in her level gaze. A nod, and she was gone, bounding toward the distant depot like a creature out of legend, shod in seven-league boots.

Then, and then only, was McCrae free to act. He too kicked off his weights. His fingers were fumbling for his holster as he threw himself into the ravine. His needle-gun was poised and ready a few instants later as he joined del Morgan and the girl on the narrow floor of the canyon.

The second mate had lifted the girl to his shoulders. A blush darkened his cheeks as McCrae dropped beside him.

"Get back. McCrae! We're getting out of here!"

"Stand still!" There was no heat in Kirk McCrae's voice. Just a cold and deadly warning, unmistakably definite. "One move and I'll burn you down, del Morgan!"

"You—you madman!" gasped del Morgan. "You'll lose your rocket for this! I'll see to it"

But he did not move—which was what McCrae wanted. A move at this stage might prove fatal. Something at the other end of the ravine was creeping closer each moment! McCrae's eyes searched

the semi-gloom, his gun poised and ready. To del Morgan he said, "You know you couldn't jump out of here," he told del Morgan. "What?" asked del Morgan.

"Sheer walls. A narrow opening. You could jump *up*, *yes*—but you'd fall right back. And with her in your arms, you'd be defenseless against—Back!"

His needle-gun spat as he shouted. del Morgan went stumbling hastily backward; the shot blazed past his falling body. He turned, and his eyes jolted open.

"A—a crawler!" he faltered.

"Mmm. Saw him from topside. Got a gun?"

"No," del Morgan quavered.

"Thought as much. Doesn't matter. They're almost impossible to kill, anyway. Silicoid carapace. Best we can do is stall him off till—Stand still, damn you!"

Del Morgan's mouth was loose-lipped with terror.

"I'm going to jump! I've got to get out of here!"

"You'll stay!" corrected Kirk McCrae grimly. "I'm not going to have you tumbling back into that thing's tonsils."

Again his gun spat flame toward the Phobian monstrosity, edging dangerously close. It was now so near that McCrae could see the details of its incredible structure. Long, prehensile snout protruding from a bullet-shaped head. A reptilian figure, eight-legged, squat, armour-plated, with an unearthly carapace composed of some silicoid material. Like a thinking, animated stone—lethal, indestructible.

Only the flame of McCrae's needle-gun held the crawler back. Its nervous organization was so obscure that it did not feel pain, but it recognized danger in the molten fusion of its parts.

It could not be held back for long. Sooner or later its weak, beast brain would realize it was not seriously menaced by this hot, red torrent. Then it would close upon its prey inexorably.

McCrae glanced anxiously aloft. Faces rimmed the ledge, cries reached his ears thinly. And then—a tawny, snakelike length came slithering down the sheer wall. The rope! McCrae breathed a sigh of thanksgiving.

"Loop it around you, quick!" he snapped at del Morgan. "Then jump!" He turned his face upward, cupped his hands and bawled:

"Pull when they reach ground level! Got it?"

The figure at the other end of the rope nodded. Del Morgan had flung a bowline about his waist. Gloria Lansing still lay in his arms.

"N-now?" he quavered.

"Now!" barked McCrae.

The other man leaped. As McCrae had said, he shot up straight, his line of flight paralleling the walls of the ravine. Against the light gravity he easily cleared the rim.

Without the rope, he would have fallen back into the hole again. But as it was, there were eager arms waiting to tug on the rope the instant he and his unconscious burden had cleared the edge. One pull—and they were safe.

McCrae watched them disappear, then turned to find the crawler had writhed still closer. Again he had the satisfaction of bathing it in a fiery blast of his needle-gun, seeing one sandy limb melt like leadfoil and puddle across the rocky soil. The crawler lurched blindly, but stumbled on.

Then the rope came tumbling down again. Kirk McCrae wrapped the loop about him and leaped.

That was that. Except for one last little detail which clamored for attention. Reaching the surface, McCrae strode to the side of del Morgan, now anxiously bent over the recumbent Gloria. He spun his fellow officer about.

"She all right?"

"I think so. Stunned, but not injured."

"Good! Then—get 'em up!"

"W-what?" del Morgan stared at him dazedly.

"We," said Kirk McCrae coldly, "have a couple of matters to settle. Disobedience to a superior officer in time of stress, for one thing. Incompetence, and failure in line of duty. Or maybe I'm doing this just for the hell of it. Get ready!"

"See here, McCrae!" blustered del Morgan, "You can't bulldoze me! I won't participate in any vulgar brawl."

"So?" McCrae looked at him speculatively. "You won't defend yourself, eh?"

"Certainly not. And furthermore—"

"O.Q.," sighed McCrae. "I warned you. Here I come—ready or not!" He swung. Just once. It was enough. It was neat and clean and accurate. Del Morgan collapsed into heavy slumber.

Not that the incident was closed, by any means.

At least, thought McCrae gloomily, that was one pleasant recollection to bear with him in durance vile.

For the hundredth time that day, he rose from his cot and paced the floor of his narrow cabin. He snapped on his wall radio, snapped it off again impatiently as the annoying strains of swoop music blared from it. He picked up, leafed fretfully through, and discarded a book. He chafed.

A week had passed since the little fracas on Phobos. A week which might have been seven days of "glamour, romance and thrill-packed adventure" to the tourists of the luxury liner *Bluebell*, but which certainly had been, for Space Officer Kirk McCrae, two hundred odd hours of boredom.

Lieutenant McCrae was confined to quarters, charged with violation of practically every regulation in the code-book.

In the past week, the *Bluebell* party had completed its allotted three-day stay on Mars. Now, all jets flaring, the luxury liner was en route back to Earth. In a few more days, it would cradle at Long Island Spaceport. The passengers would depart, returning to their various homes to brag about the marvels they had seen—and Kirk McCrae would appear before a drumhead courtmartial to answer for his alleged sins.

"So," thought McCrae savagely, "the hell with them! I can get another job. International Strato always needs men. I'd rather do an Earth hop than—"

Which was brave talk, but untrue. Kirk McCrae was a spaceman. No Earth berth would ever satisfy his deep love for flight among the ebon depths of the void.

A knock sounded on the door. McCrae glanced curiously at his wrist-chronometer. Not lunchtime yet. Then who—

It was Johnny Arbogast. A strangely unsmiling Arbogast whose eyes became even more sympathetic as, roving about the cabin, they noted the overflowing ashtrays, the sprawling magazines, the manifold evidences of his friend's discontent.

"Hi!" said Arbogast.

"Are you real, or a touch of indigestion?" McCrae grunted.

"I'm sorry, Kirk," Arbogast said embarrassedly. "But I couldn't come before. The Old Man wouldn't let me."

McCrae swept a chair clear by the simple expedient of dumping its contents to the floor. He shoved it at his guest.

"Sit down, chum—and talk. Don't mind me if I seem a trifle spellbound. It's been so long since I've seen anyone but the mess-boy—Oh, skip that! What's the news? Has the Old Man finally decided I did the right thing?"

"The answer," Johnny Arbogast said, "is 'no.'" He sat down. "The current story is that after browbeating the tour party into misery all afternoon, you climaxed the affair by refusing to go to Miss Lansing's rescue until del Morgan forced you into it. You then wound up an inglorious interlude by viciously attacking the gallant Sir Ronald del Morgan.

"Oh, don't look at me like that! I don't believe it. But that's what they're saying. That's why I finally wangled permission to

come and see you. I figured there'd be another angle."

"There," snorted McCrae, "is. Listen." He gave out. It was the same story, but it sounded different. "So then," he concluded, "I let him have it. Maybe it is against regulations, but I was so blasted mad—"

"You should have hit him twice," commented Arbogast. "Once for me."

"Once," said McCrae, "was enough. But look, how about the passengers? They saw it all happen. Didn't Captain Lynch investigate? Didn't they explain about—"

Arbogast shook his head. "Earthlubbers, chum. They wouldn't recognize a crisis if they met it at high noon. Miss Priddy and Chickering never did understand what it was all about. And J. Preston Wright clinched the case against you. Claimed you were surly all day, and declared that del Morgan's nitwit nosedive into the ditch was, quote, 'The most valorous exhibition of spaceman-ship I have ever witnessed, egad!' unquote."

"Wright's a fool!" groaned McCrae. "But surely they knew the crawler was dangerous?"

"The crawler," Johnny Arbogast reminded him gently, "was in the shadows, Kirk. It wasn't visible from topside."

"But Miss Lansing! She—"

"Come out of it, keed. La Belle Lansing was fast asleep throughout the interlude. All she knows is that you were a nasty man, and that when she came to, Ronnie del Morgan was Her Hero. Only one person went to bat for you. Eileen. And the skipper developed a deaf ear when she tried to talk."

Kirk McCrae cracked his knuckles angrily.

"But del Morgan knows!" he gritted. "I'll knock the truth out of him!"

"Wishful thinking, pal. You can't knock out what's not in. He's allergic to truth."

Arbogast stared at McCrae sympathetically.

"Kirk, those two are going to bust you out of the Service, or else. I'll stick by; most of the command will. But Lynch, after all, is the skipper. He carries lots of weight. And with del Morgan to back him up—"

"You keep out of this," growled McCrae. "I'm not going to let you get messed up just because I'm on the spot. So they're going to bust me, eh? Wait! If I don't prove I'm in the clear, I hope to crack up on an asteroid. I hope—"

It was at that moment there came a violent, wrenching crash. The ship's lights flickered, dimmed. Concussion trembled the

flooring beneath the two men. McCrae's chair jammed tight against the forward wall, and Johnny Arbogast pitched from his seat to skid scrambling across the floor.

Books tumbled from their cases, a pitcher crashed from the table into a thousand bits, the groan of tortured metal shuddered about them. A cascade of sound dinned in their ears.

And over and above the tumult came the frenzied rasp of the ship's intercommunication system. The strained voice of Captain Lynch, bawling orders from the control turret.

"Emergency posts! All hands— emergency posts!"

CHAPTER IV

In Deadly Peril

Johnny Arbogast picked himself up off the floor. A hurt look was in his eyes.

"Now see what you've done!" he told McCrae. "That's a devil of a thing to wish!"

But Kirk McCrae was halfway to the door. His voice roared back over his shoulder.

"We've cracked up! Come on!"

They hurried from the cabin.

The control turret was a scene of chaos. Delicate instruments had slid from their niches to litter the floor. The shock of the crash had broken the log-recorder from its moorings and smashed it into the emergency control bank. An excited mob of passengers, in violation of every order, had jammed forward seeking an explanation.

Their clamoring so drowned all other sounds that Kirk McCrae did not realize for some minutes that a familiar drone was missing—the subdued, steady hum of the hypatomic motors which drove the ship.

Captain Lynch was at his wit's end attempting to quiet the tumult, force the passengers from the turret, draw some modicum of order out of chaos. Ensign Tommy Travers was at the control banks doing nothing—for there was nothing to be done now, with the motors stilled. Del Morgan was going through lots of emotions which, so far as McCrae could see, meant nothing.

He glanced at Johnny Arbogast, and Arbogast nodded. Together, working swiftly, smoothly, capably, they succeeded in clearing the turret. Most passengers, when assured that "everything was perfectly all right", allowed themselves to be herded away.

Finally there remained but one un-uniformed person in the turret—old J. Preston Wright. Him they could not budge, standing, as he was, on his authority as vice-president of the Fleet.

It was then that, for the first time, they learned what had happened, McCrae strode to the forward visiplat, snapped it on, and looked not upon open space—but upon the raw, boulder-strewn surface of a planetoid!

The lens also brought into view the *Bluebell*'s prow. It looked like an accordion. The ship had crashed almost nose on, managing to pull up at the last moment, preventing head-on impact, but crumpling the prow wickedly. The fore under-carriage had been scraped off as the ship bounced to a halt on the rocky terrain.

Ensign Travers flushed miserably under McCrae's curious eyes.

"I couldn't help it, Mr. McCrae. I saw it coming. The automatics warned, and I shoved on the deflectors. But they wouldn't take hold. At the last moment I did the only thing I could think of: lifted the nose and shot two blasts through the left jets to break the crash."

"That's all you could do," said McCrae, "if the deflectors wouldn't work. But why wouldn't they? They were in O.Q. condition at the last report. Captain Lynch—"

Lynch was glaring at him angrily. He didn't answer McCrae's implied question; he parried with one of his own.

"What are you doing up here. Lieutenant? I believe you were confined to quarters."

"I was. But you issued an emergency call. You'll find in the regulations book that all spacemen, under charge of anything less serious than mutiny, are automatically returned to active duty by an emergency call. Now, those shunts—"

Del Morgan interrupted sulkily.

"I can answer that, McCrae. They were O.Q. yesterday. I inspected them myself."

"That did the trick," snorted Johnny Arbogast.

McCrae silenced him with a glance.

"He's probably right, Johnny. There's something I don't understand about this crack-up. Things aren't acting O.Q. It's a rogue asteroid we've busted on, and rogues are peculiar. They come wobbling in on crazy trajectories, and you can't do anything about 'em.

"This one's way off its orbit, though. Between Earth and Mars. And apparently streaking for somewhere like a bat out of Hades,

and carrying us with it. Where? That's the question. Travers—audio Chief Engineer McGinty!”

“Yes, sir!”

Lynch's face was mauve with outraged dignity.

“*Mister McCrae!* I'll remind you, sir, that *I'm* the captain of the *Bluebell*. By what right—”

“Got the Chief, Travers?” McCrae ignored him.

Travers shook his head.

“I can't get anything, sir. The intercommunication system is out of order.”

“Then hop below and find out why the hypos aren't operating. And while you're there, find out the extent of the damage. Johnny, get to work! Shoot the stars on the astrocalc. See where this hunk of rock is piggy-backing us.”

“Right!” said Arbogast.

He turned to the instrument and started cramming figures into its mechanical brain. McCrae turned to the impotently spluttering skipper.

“Captain Lynch,” he pleaded, “a couple of days from now you're going to have me hauled before the Board, and cut off my jets. I won't argue that question now. We are faced with a more vital problem. At this moment, I believe we are in grave peril. There are—peculiar circumstances here. I think I can be of assistance, sir. With your permission, I would like to remain on the bridge.”

Lynch interrupted him with an irate wave of his hand.

“Never mind the grandstanding, McCrae. Return immediately to your cabin and consider yourself under arrest!”

McCrae's eyes studied the captain with gathering disgust.

“And if I refuse, sir?” he said slowly.

Lynch turned to the civilian spectator.

“You see, Mr. Wright? As I said, this man is a rebellious troublemaker!”

“He is.” Wright nodded. “McCrae, I advise you to obey orders. Your attitude is distinctly mutinous.”

“And as for the danger”—Lynch stepped to the controls, pressed studs—“we'll lift off this planetoid, make whatever repairs are necessary and continue our journey.”

He jabbed the studs again. Still nothing happened. He stepped to the auxiliary audio, rasped a query down its iron throat. Nothing happened. He coughed then, anxiously and waddled to the rocket plungers, fingered one dubiously.

Nothing happened.

Kirk McCrae smiled grimly. "Perhaps, Captain, you are satisfied now?"

A flying figure burst into the cabin.

"Well, Travers?"

"Ch-chief's completely baffled, sir!" puffed young Travers. "Hypos won't spark at all. Generators are working, and the electrical equipment seems to be in perfect order—but it's blanketed out, cold? McGinty thinks it's a hysterisis bloc. The audios are out, and the A.C. units—"

"Ship damaged much?"

"A small leak in Number Seven Foredeck, and one rocket-jet smashed, but she's navigable. If we could lift her off this rock, we could fix her in jig-time."

"But we can't lift," complained McCrae. "Why?"

Johnny Arbogast moved to his side.

"I think I've found out. Kirk. Look!"

He held out a sheet scribbled with computations. McCrae frowned as he studied them.

"You're sure?"

"Fairly, It's the only thing that explains—"

"How about our trajectory? Figure that yet?"

"Mmm-hmm. Read it and weep!"

This time McCrae stared at Arbogast's figures with something akin to horror. For an instant his pose was that of stricken consternation. Then he turned again to the skipper, handed him the sheets, spoke with a deadly finality.

"Well, sir, I was right. We are in a frightfully dangerous position. There is only one thing I can think of. It's a fantastic plan, but with your permission, here it is. We must call all hands to the locks, get electrical equipment from the bins, and jury-rig—"

"*Mister McCrae!*" Lynch's voice was disdainful. He rejected Arbogast's calculations with the briefest of glances. "I have been very patient with you. I am not interested in fanciful dangers, nor in your crack-brained plans for evading perils that do not exist."

"Nor do the computations of Mr. Arbogast frighten me. We are faced with a very simple problem. That of making minor repairs and lifting the *Bluebell* from an asteroid. We can do this without your aid. I repeat, therefore, my order. Return to your quarters and confine yourself there!"

Silence gripped the turret for the space of a labored breath. Then Kirk McCrae spoke. But not to his skipper. To his only ally in a hostile group.

"Johnny," he said quietly, "how long do you figure we have?"

"Hard to say," Arbogast replied. "You know how rogue asteroids are. They accelerate crazily at perihelion. Twenty hours. Maybe twelve. Maybe as little as eight."

"And each passing hour," said McCrae, "makes it more difficult. Captain Lynch, after reading Mr. Arbogast's figures, you still intend to rest quietly on this asteroid until the *Bluebell* has been repaired?"

"Exactly! Now, Mr. McCrae, if you will please withdraw—"

"I'm sorry, Johnny." McCrae said regretfully. "It's got to be done. Are you with me or against me?"

"I'm with you, Kirk," Arbogast said in even tones.

Lynch looked startled. "What? What's all this about?"

Then the two men moved as one. Two hands streaked to two belts. And Captain Lynch was staring into the 'black maws of a brace of needle-guns.

"I regret to inform you Captain Lynch," Kirk McCrae said with infinite sadness, "that the *Bluebell* is temporarily under my command. Be kind enough to take off your gun-belt and toss it to the floor!"

But the skipper didn't react properly.

Captain Framingham Lynch was short and pudgy. Hours of pacing the recreation deck of a luxury liner had robbed him of youthful alertness, but he was a spaceman. He did not obey McCrae's command. Instead, he leaped forward and as he leaped he bellowed.

"*Mutiny*, by the stars! Get them, del Morgan!"

Had Lynch's aide been equally a man, there might have been a different end to the scene. For neither McCrae nor Arbogast could ever have forced themselves to use rays against a superior officer.

But del Morgan did not draw. Livid, he tossed his gun-belt to the floor. The skipper charged forward futilely into the encircling arms of Johnny Arbogast. Arbogast 'wrenched his gun from him, pushed him to the wall beside a wide-eyed, crimson-faced J. Preston Wright. A motion of the hand, and del Morgan made it a trio.

"Travers—" Arbogast said.

Ensign Tommy Travers was pale but determined.

"Take my gun if you want to, Johnny. But I'll string along with you and Kirk."

"Idiot!" McCrae snapped. "You'll do nothing of the sort."

Captain Lynch laughed mirthlessly.

"He's already done it, McCrae. That makes three of you now."

McCrae, Arbogast, Travers. I'll see you all committed to a Uranian prison camp for this day's work."

At that moment the door of the control turret opened, and a slim, trim figure stepped in. Kirk whirled.

"Come in," he warned, "with your hands up— Oh! You!"

"In the flesh," giped a gay voice, "and no duplicate. Captain, the passengers are asking why— Oh, Kirk!"

Eileen O'Hara's hand flew to her lips, and her eyes were bright with terror.

"Kirk," she whispered, "what have you done?"

"Some day you'll learn to keep your snub nose out of things, redhead!" grunted McCrae impatiently. "Why didn't you stay below where you belonged? Well, you might as well line up with the others. I've taken over control of the ship."

"Control of—But why, Kirk?"

"Must you know everything? Because our pigheaded captain refuses to believe we are in danger. Something has to be done, and quick. Lynch wouldn't try the only scheme that might save us. Well, hurry up! Against the wall, Sis!"

Slow seconds dripped away. Eileen's lower lip trembled; she caught it in firm, white teeth.

"You're sure, Kirk?" she said slowly, quietly.

"You don't think I'd mutiny unless I were, do you?"

"Yes!" spat Captain Lynch. "And I'll see that you get a hundred and fifty years for this, McCrae!"

"No," said Eileen soberly. "No, I don't believe you would, Kirk. That's why I'm not going to get in line."

"What!"

"I'll be more useful," said the girl, "out of it."

"No!" groaned McCrae. "You crazy redhead—"

"Four of you now," counted Captain Lynch.

"The more the merrier," Johnny Arbogast grinned. "We're in up to our necks now. We'd better get going, Kirk."

McCrae surrendered to circumstances wholly out of his control.

"All right," he said, "you asked for it. Keep an eye on the prisoners, Eileen. This may take a little time."

Crisply came his instructions.

"Johnny, first of all check your figures. Make sure they're accurate to four dots. Tommy, go below. Don't tell the engine room what's happened up here, but collect a crew, bust open the lockers, and get all the uninsulated cable you can find. Dress your crew in bulgers, take them and the cable out onto the hull and—start wrapping!"

"Start—*wrapping*, sir?"

"Around," nodded McCrae. "and around and around. Till this ship looks like a cocoon. Space the cable about fifteen yards between coils."

Arbogast, seated at the Calc desk, looked up with sudden understanding.

"A coil!"

"Coil, your eye! A solenoid. With us as the core."

"It's crazy, Kirk!"

"Sure. But we've got to try something. And if your guess is right as to the nature of this asteroid—"

"It wasn't a guess. But your plan won't work!"

"It has to." Grimly. "If it doesn't—well, what does your re-check say?"

Johnny Arbogast nodded reluctantly.

"You're right. It has to. The trajectory is exactly as I figured before. And we have already started to accelerate."

There had been a long, strained silence from those seated along the side wall under the surveillance of Eileen. Now, Captain Lynch was no longer able to control his curiosity.

"Would it be asking too much, Mr. McCrae," he asked stonily, "to demand a translation of that gibberish?"

Kirk McCrae glanced up from the controls over which he was hovering, fingers probing, mind planning every move he must later make. He could not prevent the note of sarcasm that crept into his voice.

"You saw the figures, Captain Lynch. Interpret them."

Lynch swallowed, with difficulty, a portion of his self-esteem, and made a grudging acknowledgment.

"I—I didn't study the figures, McCrae."

"I thought not. Very well, then; here it is in a nutshell. The reason our electrical equipment is blanketed, the reason our hyp-atomics won't operate, is that the rogue asteroid on which we've crashed is—*magnetic!*"

"That's why Travers couldn't avoid hitting it, shields or no shields. It drew us in like a slim, steel needle."

"Even so—where lies the danger?" Lynch demanded. "Apparently you've thought up some method of escaping this—er—magnet. Why, then, did you deliberately mutiny, set yourself in line for inescapable punishment?"

"I am a determined man, Lieutenant. Perhaps even"—he gulped, continued doggedly—"even, as you said, 'pig-headed.' But I am not unreasonable. Had you not moved so swiftly, I would have discovered this fact for myself, listened to your plan—"

"*Time!*" exploded McCrae. "That's why! *Time!*"

"But we have lots of time—"

"We have," corrected McCrae savagely, "between eight and ten hours, according to Mr. Arbogast's revised figures. Because this planetoid on which we are ensnared, Captain Lynch, is racing at lightning speed *into the sun!*"

CHAPTER V

The Acid Test

J. Preston Wright gasped. So did Eileen O'Hara. Lieutenant Ronald del Morgan laughed curtly.

"Rot!" he said. But Captain Lynch turned on him.

"Quiet!"

He met McCrae's gaze squarely.

"Lieutenant," he said, "may I see those figures again?"

Silently, Kirk McCrae passed them along. And as he did so, a prayer hung on his lips.

Captain Framingham Lynch was no fool. He was a spaceman. What he said next was a measure of his true stature.

"Lieutenant McCrae," he said, "is there any way in which I can assist you?"

McCrae's mouth dropped open. Which, considering the sudden way his heart leaped, offered a rather dangerous exit to that battered organ.

"S-sir?" he stammered.

"I am an old man," said Captain Lynch. "And it may be that I am an old fuss-budget, as well. But I've run the spaceways, man and boy, for almost thirty years. My experience may be of some value to you. That is—if you'll advise me what you are planning to do."

It was at this point that Lieutenant del Morgan, his astonishment equalling that of the flabbergasted McCrae, now served a neat turn on the chameleon circuit. He took his cue from Captain Lynch. Suddenly he too was all eagerness, sweetness and light.

"Kirk, old boy!" he said heartily. "Count me in on this, too. Anything I can do—"

"You," snapped Captain Lynch sternly, "be quiet! I'll settle with you later, del Morgan. Perhaps I should have listened to Miss O'Hara a week ago. Well, McCrae?"

"Thank you, Skipper," McCrae said gratefully. "Well—here's the way I figured. Inasmuch as the planetoid had so much magnetic power that it drew us to it, despite our force-fields and motors, it is obvious that we can never generate enough power to escape it with our own potential!"

"But there is another way of escaping—using power not of our own making."

"And that?" prompted the skipper.

"The potential of the asteroid itself! According to our ammeter readings, this rogue planetoid is a highly charged positive mass! You might call it a 'cosmic positron' on a gigantic scale."

"We, as a more or less 'neutrally charged' mote of steel, were naturally drawn to it. But—if we could develop a high negative charge from our own power, augment this by setting up a direct current through a cable solenoid engulfing us, the core—"

"Opposites repel!" finished the captain. "The asteroid would kick us away from it!"

"Far enough," nodded McCrae, "that we might reset our shields and blast clear! Exactly!"

Lynch leaped from his seat. "Then what are we waiting for?" he demanded wildly. "Eight hours from the sun gives us only about four hours leeway! Blast you for a stupid young puppy, McCrae! Don't you realize that once we get within four hours of the sun, we'll *never* kick free?"

"You stay here and get your stud-placements figured out! Come on, Arbogast! You and I will go and help Chief McGinty and his engineers."

"Nurse O'Hara!" The Old Man had now completely forgotten the loss of his command. He was a new man; a man Kirk McCrae had never seen before. A man he liked.

"Nurse, go below and keep the passengers occupied. Tell them—oh, tell them whatever you darn well please! That we stopped to refuel, or something silly. Passengers are stupid sheep, anyway."

His chin jutted out.

"All right, everybody, move!"

Del Morgan rose uncertainly.

"How about me, sir?"

"You? Oh—you?" Lynch glared at his late favorite witheringly. "I don't care what you do. For your own good, I would suggest you keep out of Lieutenant McCrae's reach, though. Otherwise he might 'attack' you again. I hope!"

After that, the events of the next two hours were a sort of anticlimax. True, those were not altogether happy hours for the sweating crew and command of the luxury liner *Bluebell*. There was that dreadful moment when it was learned that the cable line would not reach as far as had been hoped.

McCrae's heart sank suddenly to his boots when that revelation made itself known. It was Captain Lynch who remembered,

in the nick of time, the fourteen cable-coils in the cargo bin, a shipment picked up for Lunar III at Venus City. This was no time to argue the sanctity of cargoes. The coils were hauled from their place of concealment. The job was completed.

There came that other devastating moment when Kirk McCrae pressed the studs that, theoretically, should have activated the coil, jolting the *Bluebell* free of its captor planetoid. And nothing happened! But this time it was Johnny Arbogast whose quick, keen, mathematical mind supplied the solution.

"Counter-E.M.F.," he grunted. "Light and heat circuits aboard the ship. Got to cut 'em!"

"The passengers," said Tommy Travers. "They'll be scared."

"And cold," assented McCrae, "and in the dark. But that's better than being roast tourists. Cut 'em!"

Thus it was that, a scant eighteen minutes before the *Bluebell* hurtled along on its unwanted cosmic steed into the solar danger zone from which, according to Johnny Arbogast's hair-trigger computations, there could be no escape, the last arrangement was completed.

Kirk McCrae, his heart in his mouth, pressed the stud.

It worked. There came a jolting lurch, so violent that even those who expected it were thrown off their feet. Then a sensation of whirling, headlong flight. When this sensation slowed, McCrae pressed the second combination of studs, those which activated the *Bluebell's* rocket-jets.

With a last reluctant shudder, the luxury liner yanked free of its bonds—and was once again afloat in space, safe to return to Earth.

It was then, and then only, that Kirk McCrae relaxed. He had not realized he was so weary, that his brain was so dry with fatigue, until he tossed himself into a chair, knowing his task was done, and done well.

And it was then that Captain Lynch came to him, accompanied by a stern visaged, lantern-jawed old man, a vice-president of the Fleet for which they both worked. A frown was on Lynch's face. Even the jolt of escape was not so great as that which shook McCrae at the skipper's words.

"What are you doing on the bridge, McCrae? You're under orders to go to your quarters, are you not?"

McCrae sat bolt upright. His voice refused to work.

"B-but," he stammered, "but I th-thought—"

"Hrrumph!" said J. Preston Wright. "Just as you say. Captain this is a most troublesome young man. Well, you'll not be bothered with him any longer. I've been witness to his indiscretions

today. And I assure you, he'll no longer serve under you or any other captain of the IPS Fleet!"

There were a million words clamoring for utterance in McCrae's brain. But his tongue couldn't find one. Not at this moment. He just sat there, staring, incoherent, incredulous.

And then—

"Because," said Captain Lynch softly, "you deserve rest, you're ordered to quarters for a good long sleep, McCrae. And—" He grinned. "And what Mr. Wright means is, you'll never have to take orders from any captain again. Because when we get to Earth, you'll be given what you've so richly earned—a command of your own!"

There crept a note of regret into his voice.

"I am sorry, Lieutenant," he said sincerely, "that we learned to understand each other so late. Our work together might have been more pleasant. However, you're a luckier man than I. I'm stuck on this double-blank-blasted passenger run for the rest of my natural days. You'll get a decent command. A patrol ship. Perhaps even a fighting vessel."

Kirk McCrae stared.

"S-skipper," he said weakly, "I hardly know what to say. But I—there's one thing I'd like to do. I'd like to serve one last cruise under you before I take a command of my own. If it can be arranged that way—"

He looked at Preston Wright pleadingly. And Wright nodded.

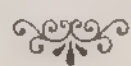
"It can be, Lieutenant. If you really want it so."

"I do," said McCrae simply.

Captain Lynch smiled. It was a proud smile. Then he frowned. And his voice was curiously gruff.

"*Agh!*" he stormed. "The man is stark, staring mad! What he needs is medical attention! A nurse. Where is Miss O'Hara?"

And—it was a funny thing. But that happened to be exactly what Lieutenant Kirk McCrae was thinking.





Phantom Out of Time

Graed Garroway's empire on Earth was toppling, smashed by the flaming vengeance of Dirk Morris who struck from nowhere with blinding speed and true justice. Yet such a thing could not be—for Dirk Morris was dead, slain at the brutal command of the Black Dictator.

METAL GRATED UPON METAL, A HEAVY GATE AT the far end of the corridor swung open, and footsteps stirred dull echoes down the quiet prison-block. Neil Hardesty turned beseeching eyes to his friend and leader.

"Dirk," he begged, "for the last time . . . let us share this with you? Please!"

Vurrth, the hulking Venusian, nodded mutely, lending his support to Neil's appeal. Shaughnessey, Vurrth's earthly equal in size and strength, rumbled deep in his throat, "Yes, Dirk. We're all in this together. Let's take the punishment together . . . like men."

Dirk Morris shook his head. His voice was firm; his gaze calm and steady.

"No. It's better *one* of us should die, than all. We set ourselves a righteous task: to rid the System of a madman and a tyrant. We pledged ourselves to fight . . . to win . . . or to die. Our first leader has already given his life that worlds may someday again breathe the air of freedom. A dozen of our comrades have paid the price of rebellion. Edwards, Johnson, Vallery . . . our blood-brothers.

"Now it is my turn. But my passing does not mean we give up the fight. You, Hardesty, must take over the leadership of our little clan. When you have been freed, carry on! Find new recruits;

rebuild our organization. Four against an empire is mighty odds, but if you four surrender, the liberty of all men is doomed for generations!”

Fred Meacher said hopefully, “That’s right. Someone must pick up the torch. Neil, if you’d rather not, *I’ll* bear the *Message*—”

“Never mind,” said Hardesty. “I’m ready to take it. Well, Dirk?”

The footsteps were drawing nearer. Swiftly, coolly, but deliberately, Dirk Morris placed his lips close to Neil’s ear, whispered a brief sentence. Hardesty started. His eyes first widened, then narrowed with incredulous surmise.

“Dirk!” he gasped. “But that’s . . . You can’t mean—”

“Quiet!” warned Brian Shaughnessey. “Here they come! The skulking rats!” He spat contemptuously on the floor as a band of armed men halted before the cell in which the quartet was imprisoned.

The foremost guardsmen parted, and before the grille appeared a man tall and powerful, dark of eye and beetling of brow; a personage whose innate ruthlessness and cruelty could not be disguised even by the ornate finery he wore. This was Graed Garroway, “Black” Garroway, tyrant of Earth, emperor of the System, Overlord—by force of arms—of the entire Solar Union.

He smiled. But there was little mirth in his smile, and no sincerity.

“Well, Morris?” he demanded.

“Well?” repeated Dirk stonily.

“Your time passes swiftly. Have you decided to tell your secret?”

“I know one thing,” said Morris, “that is no secret. My time passes swiftly, yes. But so does yours. The days of your dictatorship are numbered, Garroway. Soon the cleansing flame of righteous rebellion will rise to sweep you and every evil thing you stand for from the face of creation!”

Garroway stiffened, flushing with dark anger.

“You speak boldly for a doomed man, Morris. Guards, open the cell!” He scowled. “It may amuse you to learn that I did not need your information, traitor. I gave you a final chance to offer it of your own free will. But your cherished ‘secret’ has already been solved.”

“Solved!” That was Hardesty. “You mean—?”

“Quiet, Neil!” warned Dirk. “He’s faking!”

Garroway laughed.

“Faking? You shall see in a few minutes, when I put you to death in the murderous device constructed by your one-time leader, Dr. Townsend!”





"Murderous—" began Hardesty.

"Please, Neil! Then you . . . you found Dr. Townsend's chamber?" asked Dirk.

"Yes. And experimented with it, too. We know, now, its purpose. Too bad Robert Townsend did not live to receive our congratulations. So that was your secret, eh? Your late leader succeeded in perfecting a disintegration chamber?"

"Disint—" began Morris. Then he stopped abruptly. When he spoke again, his voice was defiant. "Well . . . now that you know, what are you going to do about it?"

Brian Shaughnessey stared at his friend miserably. "Disintegrating machine!" he choked. "Nothing but a damned theoretical gadget! Is *that* the great invention we've been risking our lives for? Dirk—"

"Do about it?" laughed Garroway negligently. "Why, I'm going to turn it to my own usage, of course. And you, my unfortunate young conspirator, will attain the distinction of being the instrument's first human victim. Come, guards! We have no more time to waste."

"A moment!" interrupted Morris. "You will keep your promise? My companions go free when I die?"

The Overlord nodded with mock graciousness.

"Graed Garroway needs compromise with no man. But I have given my word. Yes, your companions go free."

"Very well, then. I am ready."

Morris turned and gripped warmly the hand of each of his companions in turn. Then he stepped forward. Two guards flanked him. The Captain of the Guard rasped a command. The little band marched down the avenue and out of sight; silence surged in to hush the stir of footsteps. Somewhere a barrier clanged metallically.

"A disintegrating machine!" moaned Shaughnessey. "A damned disintegrating machine! Suppose we *did* have it? What good would it do us? It wasn't portable. We couldn't use it to fight Garroway's hordes. Dirk's just thrown his life away for nothing—"

"Please, Brian!" begged Hardesty.

His hands were knotted at his sides, the knuckles as white as his lips. Meacher's eyes were ghastly. Only Vurrth displayed no emotion, but the sinews of the Venusian's throat were taut cords of strain as he, with the others, waited.

Slow seconds passed on sluggish feet. Then, after a million aeons, came the dreaded signal. From afar sounded the thin, persistent hum of pulsing current; the strong lights of the prison-

block dimmed briefly . . . glowed . . . dimmed again . . . and glowed. . . .

Brian Shaughnessey, strong fighting man that he was, raised a hand to his eyes. Neil Hardesty's breath broke in a shaken murmur. Meacher whimpered, and Vurrth's massive fists tensed at his thighs.

Again a door opened . . . again footsteps approached the prisoners. There was a look of gloating malice on Garroway's swarthy face. He said, "Open the cell, guards. Let them out now."

Hardesty whispered, "It . . . it is over?"

"It is over. Your friend has vanished . . . disappeared into whatever hell awaits rebels." The Overlord smiled. "It was a most interesting exhibition . . . most. Through the glazed pane we saw him standing, panic-stricken, frozen with terror. Then the current was turned on. Before our eyes, he vanished as a mist—"

"I don't believe it!" growled Shaughnessey. "Morris was afraid of nothing; man, beast, nor devil—"

"And . . . *and we?*" broke in Fred Meacher fearfully.

"Go free," said Black Garroway, "as I promised. But have a care! If ever I hear a word of complaint or suspicion raised against any of you again, you will share his fate. It is only through my graciousness you live."

"We understand," said Neil evenly. "Come, friends."

He led the way from the cell as a guard unlocked the door. When the four had almost reached the end of the prison corridor, Garroway called after them.

"Oh . . . one thing more! I almost forgot to thank you, Meacher!"

Shaughnessey said, "Huh?" What's that? Why? What's he got to thank *you* for, Fred?"

Meacher's pale eyes rolled, suddenly panicked,

"Me? I . . . I don't know what he's talking about—"

Black Garroway's heavy laughter filled the hall.

"What? Oh, come now, Meacher! Of course you do. I appreciate the information you gave me on Morris. The reward I promised you will be waiting at the State Hall tomorrow. A thousand credits, wasn't it? Well, come and claim it—" he chuckled stridently—"if you can."

Before the quick suspicion rising in the eyes of the comrades he had betrayed, Meacher quailed. He tugged free of Shaughnessey's hand and scampered to the protection of Garroway's guard. His voice bleated shrill remonstrance.

"Sire . . . you should not have told them! I served you faithfully and well . . . wormed my way into their inner council! Were it not for me you would never have known—"

Black Garroway avoided the informer's frenzied clawing. His voice was hard, mocking, contemptuous. "Fool! You brought me no information worth hearing! Through my own efforts I discovered Townsend's instrument and solved its secret. You are a dolt, a stupid bungler! I need no such aides."

"But I told you Morris held the Secret—"

"Bah! There is no longer a secret to be held."

"But there is, Sire! Before he died, Morris told it to—"

Hardesty interrupted coldly, "Am I to understand, Garroway, that this man is no longer under your protection?"

Garroway shrugged. "I have washed my hands of him," he said carelessly. "Come, guards!"

He turned away as Meacher screamed, vainly struggled to escape the vengeful trio closing in on him.

"Take him, Vurrth!" ordered Hardesty succinctly.

The great Venusian's hands closed briefly around the traitor's throat, stifling his garbled cries. With revealing ease he lifted the Earthman, held him dangling like a sack of meal in midair, and looked at Hardesty for orders.

"Put him down," commanded Neil. "We will settle our differences elsewhere."

Vurrth grunted, and obediently loosed his grip. The body of Fred Meacher slumped to the floor awkwardly . . . and lay still. Brian Shaughnessey bent over the crumpled figure. He glared up angrily at his comrade.

"Confound you, Vurrth! He's dead!"

Vurrth grinned slowly.

"Sor-ree," he said. "Maybe hold too tight?"

One of the guards, glancing back, muttered a word to his captain who, in turn, passed the message to the Overlord. A thin smile touched Garroway's lips, but he did not turn his head. The incident was, his attitude intimated as he led his entourage from the hall, a matter in which he took no concern whatsoever. . . .

II

As at his captors' bidding he stepped into the great metal chamber which was the late Dr. Townsend's creation, two singular emotions filled Dirk Morris' mind. One of these was thankfulness, the second . . . curiosity.

Fear was strangely absent. Perhaps that was because for many months Dirk and those with whom he conspired for the overthrow of Black Garroway's tyrannical rule had lived under a Damoclean sword. Death, long a silent guest at their every gathering, was a host whose imminence aroused no dread.

Dirk was thankful that he had been able to buy, with his own life, the freedom of his companions. Why the Emperor had been willing to strike this bargain, Dirk did not exactly understand; possibly because the Overlord held his enemies in contempt, now their leader was being removed; more likely because Garroway still held a lurking fear of those who plotted against him, and was freeing them only so that his hireling spies might watch their movements.

But even that, thought Morris gratefully, was better than that all should die, and the Movement end. Hardesty now knew the Secret, and while one remained alive to work on that knowledge, hope endured.

The second commingling emotion, curiosity, concerned the chamber into which, at this very moment, he was stepping. A "disintegration chamber" Garroway had called it, vowing his scientists had learned its method of operation. But in this, Dirk knew with positive assurance, the Overlord was mistaken. Utterly mistaken. Yet, if it were not a disintegration machine, then what—?

There was no time for further thought. The door was closed; through the thick pane Morris saw Garroway nod, saw a soldier close the switch on the instrument's control-board.

For an instant, the thin hum of current filled Dirk's ears; a terrific impact of pure electrical energy pierced his every nerve and fiber with flaming hammers of agony. He felt his knees buckle beneath him, was vainly aware that his mouth opened to cry aloud noiselessly.

A strange, twisting vibration wrenched and tore him; the solid walls about him seemed to melt and writhe at angles the eyes ached to follow. All this he saw as in the throes of wild delirium. Then, unable to longer bear the fearful pain, every sinew of his being tensed for an intolerable instant . . . then darkness, blessed darkness, rushed in to claim Dirk Morris. He sank, weak and senseless, into its enfolding arms.

Silence.

Silence and darkness.

Then, out of the silence, sound. Out of the infinite darkness, light. Light, and warmth, and comfort.

Dirk Morris opened his eyes.

He opened his eyes . . . then closed them again, shaking his head to rid his fancy of its weird hallucination. Beside him a voice spoke soft, rippling syllables that held no meaning. Another voice replied; a masculine voice, equally soft, but elderly and grave.

The possessor of the first voice, pressed a cup to Morris' lips. An unknown liquor tingled Dirk's palate and swept the lethargy from his veins. He stirred and lifted himself to one elbow, stared about him incredulously.

"Where—?" he began— "where on earth—?" Then he stopped, seeing the sky above him, the ground supporting him, those who were his Samaritans. A poignant regret seized him. He whispered, "*Not* on Earth. Then the ancient religions were true? There is an afterlife . . . a Heaven peopled with angels."

The girl kneeling beside him laughed, her voice like the music of rill waters. She turned to her elder companion, said in strange, accented English, "See, I was right, father! He *is* from over There. I recognized the garments; severe and ugly. Not at all like *ours*—"

She touched the flowing hem of her own brief, silken kirtle with fingers equally soft and white. Both she and the gray-beard were dressed in clothing of classic simplicity. No stiff military harness like that worn by earthlings of Dirk's era, but something resembling the *chiton* of ancient Greece.

Dirk said wonderingly, "You . . . you're human!"

"But, of course, stranger."

"This . . . this isn't Earth, though. Nor any planet of the System!"

Dirk gestured toward the landscape, smooth and gaily gardened, stretching from horizon to horizon with no ornament save the natural adornments of Nature. Here were no grim and ugly buildings towering to the skies, blocking the sun's warm rays from view; no shining mansions flanked by filthy hovels; none of the cheek-and-jowl splendor and squalor of the world whence he had come. Here was only gentle, untrammelled beauty in a quiet, pastoral existence.

No planet of the Solar System was so organized. Dirk knew. But were a second, convincing proof needed, he had but to glance at the sky. There shone not the lone, familiar Sun of Earth . . . but *two* suns! A binary system. One golden-yellow like Sol, the other a bluish-white globe of radiance.

"No," answered the elderly man, "this is neither the Earth from which you came nor any planet of its system. This is the planet Nadron, satellite of the twin suns, Kraagol and Thuumion, in the fourth galactic level."

Triumph was a bursting bomb in Morris' heart.

"Then it was a success, after all!" he cried. "Then Townsend was right! If only he had lived to see this day! A success . . . and all because Garroway's scientists, playing with an instrument they did not understand, succeeded where we had failed for years!"

"But . . . but your planet is unfamiliar to me; I do not know your suns by the names you have given them. Your system lies just where in relation to the galactic center? How many miles . . . or light years . . . are we from my native Earth?"

The old man looked at him oddly for a moment, then:

"We are *no* miles from your Earth, my friend," he announced quietly, "and the distance may be measured in *seconds* . . . not light-years."

Dirk stared, bewilderment in his eyes.

"I . . . I'm afraid I don't understand, sir. I hope you will forgive me. Perhaps you are joking—?"

"It is no jest, my boy, but the simple truth. Earth and Nadron are . . . but, stay! Let me prove my point otherwise. Has it not occurred to you to wonder that we, the people of a foreign world, know your language?"

Dirk said wonderingly, "Why . . . why, that's right; you do! But how—?"

"Because," explained the elder, "we have listened to it being spoken for many, many years. Over our visors we have both heard and watched you on your neighboring world."

"Neighboring world?"

"How came you here?" asked the old man. "What means of propulsion brought you hither?"

That, at least, Dirk knew. He answered eagerly.

"I came here through the medium of the greatest discovery ever made by man. The *teleport*, a machine invented by Robert Townsend. A perfect solution to the long puzzling problem of material transport through Space. It disassembles the atoms of any body placed in its transmitting chamber, and reconstructs that body at a destination selected by a setting of its dials.

"Through circumstances not of my own choosing, I was a subject of that machine. I was forced into the transmitter by . . . well, it does not matter whom . . . and my body broadcast to this spot. Though I do not yet, sir, understand just where I am, or exactly how I reached here—"

The old man shook his head regretfully.

"I am sorry, my boy, to tell you the machine did not work as was planned. Its theory was sound; in one respect it performed as

expected. It *did* disassemble your atomic components, did reconstruct your body elsewhere. But it was to no far bourne your journey carried you.

"Your body still stands in exactly the spot it stood before the machine operated!"

For a long, uncomprehending moment Dirk Morris gaped at his informant. At last his bedazement found words.

"Oh, now, surely you can't expect me to believe—"

"No," interrupted the graybeard gently, "not without visual evidence. Rima, my dear—?"

He turned to the girl, who nodded and from the folds of her garment produced a shimmering crystal object; a mirror of some sort, or a lens. This she handed to Dirk.

"If you will look through this—?" she suggested.

Morris lifted the crystal to his eyes wonderingly . . . then almost dropped it in his excitement!

Beneath his feet still lay the lush greensward of an alien world, but through the curious crystal he gazed upon no panorama of soft, rolling hills and pleasant valleys. Before him lay the image of a scene he had but recently quitted: the execution dock of Graed Garroway's prison!

A few feet to his right stood the metal chamber into which he had been thrust, the supposed "disintegration cell." Through the viewpane of this the Overlord was peering, a grim smirk of satisfaction on his lips. As Dirk watched, Garroway turned and gestured to the guardsman whose hand had depressed the activating switch. Dirk heard no words, but could easily read the movement of the Emperor's lips.

"Enough! It is done!"

With an instinct born of illogic, Dirk reached forth as if to grip the throat of the murderous Garroway. In doing so, the crystal left his eyes. Instantly the scene vanished. He looked once more upon distance-purpled hills softly limned in the splendor of two suns.

The girl laughed softly.

"Confusing at first, isn't it? But you'll soon—"

"Please!" begged Dirk hoarsely. "I must see—" He placed the mirrorlike object once more to his eyes, saw Graed Garroway lead the way from the execution chamber. Awkwardly, uncertainly, Morris took a step forward . . . another. Though he knew his feet trod the soil of the planet Nadron, to his eyes it seemed he glided forward across the floor of the prison.

The door swung to behind Garroway and his followers, and

involuntarily Dirk flinched . . . then grunted reproof at his own needless gesture. So far as he was concerned, that heavy metal barrier did not exist. For the briefest fraction of an instant his vision was blotted by jet darkness, then he stood outside the door, looking down the corridor.

He hastened forward, stumbling, as feet that appeared to be traversing smooth floors actually trod uneven soil, and paused at last, an invisible presence at the tableau next enacted. He witnessed his friends' release from the cell, read the movement of Hardesty's dry lips as Neil whispered, "*It . . . it is over?*" He saw Garroway's boastful warning, Brian's hot denial, then watched—first with dazed incomprehension, then with fierce understanding—the betrayal, panic and execution of Fred Meacher.

When Meacher's corpse lay on the floor at . . . or so it seemed . . . his very feet, and the comrades left the hallway, he would again have followed them. But at that moment he landed with a solid bump against something hard, and with a start he looked from the crystal to find a tree before him. More than a hundred yards away waited those who had befriended him. He retraced his steps slowly to their company.

"Now you understand and believe, my boy?" the kindly alien asked.

"I believe," said Dirk simply. "But, sir—"

"My name, man of Earth, is Slador. On this world, I am known as the Ptan Slador, which is to say 'teacher.' This is my daughter, Rima."

"I am called Morris. Dirk Morris. I also—" Dirk spoke bitterly—"have a number, as have all Earthmen of this unhappy century. Yes, Ptan Slador, I believe, but even yet I do not understand. I stand in one world, but looking through your crystal I see into another: my own. Why is this?"

"Because, Dirk Morris, our two worlds lie adjacent."

"Adjacent? You mean in Space?"

"I mean in Space-Time. Look, my young friend . . . your Earth science knows of the atom?"

"But of course. It is the building-block of matter. The smallest indivisible unit—"

"Exactly. Yet even this minute fleck of matter, the building-block of worlds, so small that it cannot be observed under man's strongest microscopes, is composed of ninety-nine per cent *empty space!*"

"Or, let me say, rather . . . what *appears* to be such to the men

of all universes. Actually, there is no emptiness in the atom. It is composed of solid matter, but the individual zeron of this single entity are all vibrating at a different frequency in the Greater Universe which includes all of Space and Time."

"Consequently, you on Earth, existing at one rate of vibration, see an entire universe vibrating at a period which matches your own. We of Nadron live under another vibration. Our solidity, our world, our universe . . . these are all part of the 'emptiness' of *your* world, just as *your* existence forms a part of the emptiness of *our* atom. Do you see?"

"Vaguely," said Dirk humbly. "Only vaguely. We, the young men of my era, are not an educated people, Ptan Slador. There was a time in Earth's history when all men were free to study where and as they wished, read what they willed. It is not so now. Only the highborn are permitted to own books, or borrow them from the Overlord's crypts; only those designated by the Emperor are taught to read and write. The rest of us, hungry for a crust of knowledge, must gather in hidden places to learn our letters from instructors who risk their lives to teach us."

"You mean," cried the girl, "one man has dared grasp so much power? So much evil power?"

Slador nodded gravely.

"Yes, my dear. I have long believed some such situation existed on our neighbor world. From scenes I have witnessed through the visor, snatches of whispered conversation, I guessed such might be the case. It is a sorry plight for a once proud world. Drowned in a sea of ignorance, sunken in a slough of misery and despair, mankind is beaten helpless—"

Dirk laughed gratingly.

"Pardon me, sir. Not beaten. Not helpless. We are ignorant, yes . . . but not yet have all of us abandoned hope of striking off our shackles."

"We have a secret organization, fostered by the late Dr. Townsend, led until recently by myself, now headed by the bravest of my former comrades: Neil Hardesty. The members of this clan are pledged to one purpose . . . the overthrow of Graed Garroway, tyrant of the Solar System."

"Our greatest hope for success lay in Dr. Townsend's invention, the *teleport*. It is quite impossible to muster an armed band on any of the planets under Garroway's thumb. His spies are everywhere. Even—" Dirk finished bitterly—"among our own supposed comrades."

"Therefore, we had planned to transport our bodies to some

extra-Solar world, there gird ourselves for a last fight against Garroway's minions. That was our dream. But now—"

He paused, shaking his head sorrowfully. That dream was now ended. Dr. Townsend's secret weapon was not what had been hoped. Instead—

Then, even as he despaired, understanding drove home with blinding force. The weapon was *not* a failure! It was a success . . . but in another way than had been planned. He cried aloud: "But, yes! I've been blind! This way is just as good . . . perhaps better!"

"What way, Dirk Morris?" asked the girl.

"There is no need to seek a far planet of a far sun! We planned that solely because we did not know anything about the existence of your world, your universe."

"Nadron shall be our rallying spot! It is the ideal spot wherein to gather our forces. Close to Earth . . . seconds, not light-years, from the foe we would crush—"

"A moment, Earthman!" interrupted Slador. "You mean to use our world as the breeding-place for conflict on yours? Is that your thought?"

"But of course. What better place?"

The Ptan shook his head gravely.

"I am sorry, my son. But I fear that is impossible. The Council would never permit it."

"Council?"

"Our government. Here we have a World Council, made up of the oldest and wisest amongst us. Many, many centuries ago the question was raised as to whether we of Nadron should establish and maintain intercourse between our neighboring planets."

"After a lengthy period of observation and study, it was decided we should not. It was the Council's judgment—" Here Slador flushed with thin apology—"that Earth is in too primitive a stage of development for such a union."

"Wherever and whenever we watched affairs unfolding, we saw war, strife, bickering and discontent. We saw poverty and hunger . . . perils unknown in our own quiet civilization. We heard the roar of gunfire and the bombastic mouthings of warlords. We found, in short, no culture worthy of inclusion in our own placid existence."

"At that time was the Law laid down . . . that we of Nadron should not embroil ourselves in Earth's affairs until such time as a civilized Earth should be able to meet us on a plane of equal amity."

"Therefore—" sighed the Ptan—"despite my private sympathy

with your cause, I am compelled to warn you that you may not use Nadron as host for your gathering forces. Though a peaceful world, we have means of enforcing this edict. I am sorry, but you must develop other plans."

Dirk stared at the speaker strickenly, realizing the logic of all Slador had said, but feeling, nevertheless, sick despair that Earth's past madresses should now so destroy the only chance of present salvation. He turned to the girl, who returned his gaze with a helpless little shrug of sympathy.

He wet his lips, said hoarsely, "But . . . but if you do not help us, Earth is doomed to tyranny for countless decades to come. You cannot refuse us your aid—"

Slador said smoothly, surprisingly, "I have not said I would not aid you. I have merely forbidden your forces the soil of Nadron. But there are . . . other ways of helping. Ways not under the ban of our Council's sage decision."

Hope surged in Morris like a welling tide.

"There are?" he cried. "What ways, Ptan Slador?"

"Have you forgotten," asked Slador, "the strangeness of your own existence here? Or is it that you do not yet see how this can be bent to use? Listen, my son—"

He spoke, and Dirk Morris listened with ever growing interest.

III

Corporal Ned Tandred, Precinct Collector of Taxes in the Ninth Ward, Thirty-Fourth district of Greater Globe City, did not like his job.

As he wheeled his unicar through the twilight shaded streets of the city, hemmed by a rush of bustling traffic, he thought regretfully of those from whom he had this day forced payment of tithes—tribute—they could ill afford.

An old man . . . an even older widow . . . the husband of an invalid wife and father of three small children . . . a young man unable, now new taxes had been exacted, to marry the girl who had been waiting for him seven long years . . . these were just a few of the humble lives the Emperor's recent edict had driven to newer, deeper, sloughs of despair. And he, Corporal Tandred, had been the unwilling instrument through which Garroway had dipped once again into the pockets of his subjects.

"Subjects!" grunted Corporal Tandred. "Not subjects . . . slaves! That's what we are, all of us. Myself included!" He tugged savagely at the handle of his unicar, careening the tiny one-

wheeled vehicle perilously to the curb of the avenue as a gigantic, gray-green armored tanker of the Imperial Army roared belligerently up the center of the street, hogging the road and scattering traffic before it. "Miserable serfs, all of us! If I thought there were half a chance of getting away with it, I'd skip this filthy uniform and—"

He stopped suddenly, a strange sensation coming over him. The sensation of somehow being watched . . . listened to.

He peered cautiously over his shoulder. No . . . no one in the car but himself. The communications unit was dull; no chance his rebellious grumbling had been overheard by a keen-eared Headquarters clerk.

Corporal Tandred breathed a sigh of relief. Nerves. Just plain nerves . . . that was all that bothered him. That was the result of living under constant surveillance, inescapable oppression. You got the feeling of never being free.

"This cursed money!" he grumbled again. "If I could get away with it, I'd throw it in the Captain's face! In the Overlord's face! Thieving—"

Once more he stopped in midsentence, his lips a wide and fearful O of bewilderment. This time he had made no mistake! There was someone near him. A voice spoke in his ear.

"Make no such foolish gesture. Corporal!"

Corporal Tandred recovered control of his car with a sudden effort. He depressed its decelerating button, drew it to the curb, and stared wildly about him.

"W-who said that?" he demanded hoarsely. "Where are you?"

"Who speaks," said the quiet, insistent voice, *"does not matter. Nor the spot from whence I speak. The important thing is that you hear and obey my words. Make not the error of hurling the tribute money in anyone's face. Deliver it to your superior officer—but see that you get a signed receipt for it. Do you understand?"*

"No!" said Corporal Tandred weakly. "I hear a voice speaking, but see no one. I don't understand—"

"It is not necessary that you understand. Just obey. Get a signed receipt for that money. That is all!"

"Wait!" cried Corporal Tandred. "Wait a minute—!" He was talking to himself. Even as he spoke, he sensed that. The strange, semi-electrical feeling of a nearby presence was gone.

For a moment he sat stock-still, trying to soothe his ruffled nerves. His effort was not altogether successful; he started the unicar with a jerk, and sped down the avenue at a rate of speed

forbidden by civic ordinance. A uniformed attendant frowned disapproval as he screeled to a stop in front of the Revenue Office, but Corporal Tandred paid him no heed. He hurried straightway to the central office, there deposited his collections before his captain.

The captain nodded abstractedly, then, his attention drawn by some oddness in the subaltern's appearance, raised a questioning eyebrow.

"What is it, Tandred? Anything wrong?"

"N-no, sir," said the corporal uncertainly.

"Someone make a complaint? That it?"

"Well, sir, there *were* several complaints. Citizens find these new taxes hard to swallow, sir; very hard."

The captain laughed derisively.

"Sheep! Let them suffer. It is no concern of ours. The Overlord has a militia to maintain. Well . . . that is all."

He waved a hand in dismissal. Corporal Tandred said hesitantly, "Yes, sir. But the . . . the receipt, sir?"

"Receipt? For what?"

"For the money, sir. Regulations, sir."

"Oh, yes." The captain grinned caustically. "Don't you trust me, Corporal? You never asked for a receipt before that I can remember."

"N-no, sir. I mean . . . of course I trust you, sir. I just thought that . . . that this being a new tax—"

"Very well; very well!" The captain scribbled, tore a receipt from his pad, and handed it to the underling. "You may go now, Corporal."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Corporal Tandred left hurriedly, still uncertain *why* he had obeyed the instructions of the mysterious voice, still uncomprehending as to *why* he should have asked for a receipt, but with a strong conviction he had done the wise thing.

He was right! Five minutes later the money vanished mysteriously from the captain's desk. Or so, at any rate, in stern, judicial court the captain swore repeatedly to an even colder superior. In vain the captain protested his innocence and tried to shift the blame to Corporal Tandred's shoulders. The Corporal was in the clear, triumphantly acquitted through possession of a signed receipt for the missing money.

In the bleak gray of the following dawn, the captain was shot for theft and conspiracy against the State. But the money was not found among his effects . . .

* * *

Brian Shaughnessey, crouched in the concealment of a flowering hedge, heard the footsteps of the guard pass within scant inches of his head. He counted slowly to himself: “. . . eight . . . nine . . . ten . . .”

Noiselessly, he gathered himself for the silent dash. Watchful waiting had taught him that ten seconds after marching past this bush, the guard turned briefly down a side lane from which the roadway was invisible. A hurried run, a swift and silent dash, would take him to the doorway of the supply warehouse.

He crouched, tensed, listened . . . then ran. For a big man, he made little noise. He had reached his objective with seconds to spare before the guard, returning from the bypath, glanced up and down the main avenue, found all clear, and resumed his rounds.

Shaughnessey grinned, slipped into the shadow of the doorway, and fumbled at his belt. He withdrew a metal ovoid, prepared to draw the pin that set its mechanism into operation . . . then stopped! His fingers faltered, and he whirled, eyes darting anxiously. For from—the darkness, a voice had spoken: “No, *Brian!*”

Brian Shaughnessey shook himself like a great, shaggy dog. He was a strong man, a man of great courage. But he was also a superstitious man. Awe dawned now in his eyes. “This is it, then,” he whispered to himself. “I’m not long for this world. It . . . it’s *him*, come to meet me. Well—” He shrugged—“if that’s the way it must be, I might as well finish this job—”

And again he reached for the pin. But this time the sense of unseen presence was so strong that Brian Shaughnessey could almost feel the grip of ghostly fingers tingling on his wrist. And the voice was louder, clearer. “No, *Brian! Not here!*”

“Morris!” cried Shaughnessey starkly, unbelievably. “Dirk Morris!”

“Hush, you idiot!” warned the voice, “*You’ll bring the guard down upon us!*”

“Us?” repeated Brian, baffled.

“Don’t toss that grenade here. You’re too close to the munitions bins. Here . . . let me have it!”

Shaughnessey, stricken with a near-paralysis of awe, felt a curious vibration tingle through his fingers as from his slackened grip the explosive ovoid slipped . . . and vanished! He stared about him wildly, gasped, “The grenade! Where did it go? Dirk—”

“Not now!” whispered the urgent voice. “Go to Neil. Tell him

to gather the Group at the regular place tonight. I will come to you. Now, get out of here. Quickly!"

"B-but I don't understand—" gulped Brian.

"Quickly!" insisted the voice.

Shaughnessey nodded. He did not in the least understand what manner of mystery here confronted him. But he was a faithful servant of the Group. It was enough for him that he had heard Dirk Morris' voice, and that voice issued orders. Without another word he turned and slipped across the pathway to the cover of the hedge. Using it as a shelter, he fled the vicinity of the warehouse.

It was well he did so. Less than two minutes later, a terrific blast hurled him headlong to the ground as a bolt of man-made lightning seared the munitions dump wherein was stored the bulk of Graed Garroway's military supplies for this area. A livid stalk of greasy smoke, flame-laced, mushroomed to the skies, and the terrain for miles around was shaken as by a temblor.

When the ensuing fire was finally brought under control, there remained but charred and twisted girders in that gaping pit which once had been a fortress. . . .

Lenore Garroway hummed softly to herself as she sat before the gorgeous, full-length mirror of her dressing-room table. She was happy . . . and that was not altogether commonplace, because for an Emperor's daughter, surrounded by ease and every comfort, dwelling in the lap of luxuries few others even dared dream of, Lenore Garroway was not often happy.

But she was now, because she was with her gems. No pleasure in the seven worlds compared, in the Princess Lenore's mind, with that of fondling her precious stones, rare and perfect specimens gathered from the farflung corners of the System at the cost of no one dared guess how many lives.

Before and about her in bounteous array lay a ransom of glittering baubles. Chalcedony and sardonyx . . . diamond and ruby . . . the rare green *pharonys* delved from the sea-bottoms of Venus, the even rarer ice-amethyst of Uranus . . . *wisstrix* from giant Jupiter and the faceted *koleidon* of tiny Eros . . . these were her playthings.

So she sat, allowing the glittering motes to sift through her soft, white fingers, raising this matched set of rings to her ears, that exquisite lavalier to her equally exquisite throat, humming softly to herself as she sat at her dressing table, watching the graceful movements of her perfect body in the full-length rock-quartz mirror.

A soft tap pulsed through the room, and the Princess Lenore turned, the flicker of a frown marring the perfection of her brow.

"Well Marta?" she demanded.

Her maid-in-waiting entered fearfully. She was old and ugly. The Princess would not have about her any who were not; her radiance must be at all times like that of a true jewel amidst paste. Even the ladies of the court were required to dress down their own lesser beauty when gathered for state occasions.

"Well, Marta?" repeated the princess.

"Your pardon, Highness," breathed the old woman. "A delegation from the women of the city—"

"What do they want?"

"It is something about . . . taxes, Highness. They say they cannot afford—"

"Taxes!" The Princess' eyes clouded. "Why must they fret me with their miserable woes? I know nothing of taxes. Bid them see my father."

Marta cringed humbly.

"They have tried to, Highness, but without success. That is why they have come here. To beg your intercession—"

"I cannot see them," said Lenore. "Tell them to go away. I am busy."

"But, Highness—"

"Away, I said!" The Princess' voice was silken-soft no longer; it flamed with sudden petulance. "I am too busy to hear their petty grievances. Send them away! And you, too!"

With abrupt, feline violence she snatched a handful of baubles from the table before her, and hurled them at the aged servant. Marta stood like a withered Danae beneath the rich rain, whined, "Yes, Highness," and disappeared. The princess shut intrusion from her mind as the door closed. She turned once more to her playthings, picked up and fondled a pendant of intricately interwoven sapphire and *tolumnis*. Its green-and-scarlet flame burned cold against the smooth satin of her breast. She hummed softly to herself, happy. . . .

It was then the voice spoke.

The voice was a man's voice. Its masculine deepness was like the rasp of grating steel in the languid femininity of this room.

"*Send them away, eh, Princess? Very well. As you have judged, so shall it also be judged against you!*"

The Princess Lenore whirled to the doorway, startled white hands leaping to her throat. Her gray-green eyes were wide with shock . . . and horror. They widened even more as they found . . . no one!

"Wh-where are you?" she gasped. "Who dares enter the boudoir of the Princess Lenore?"

She heard no sound of footsteps, but the voice drew nearer with each word.

"I so dare. Princess."

"And . . . and who are you?"

"My name does not matter. But you may call me Conscience, if you must give me a name. For I am the Conscience of an empire."

The voice was beside Lenore now. She spun swiftly, her hands seeking emptiness about her.

"It is a trick! Someone will die for this! Leave! Leave this instant, or I call the guard—"

The voice of "Conscience" laughed.

"Call the guard if you will, Princess. I will have gone ere they arrive . . . and these with me!"

This time the sound came from *behind* her. Again the girl whirled, this time to see a stupefying sight. As if imbued with eerie lapidary life, the jewels were rising from her dressing-table in great handfuls. Leaping clots of rich iridescence climbed into thin air . . . and vanished!

Up 'till now the Princess had been overwhelmed with shock; now she was struck to the quick with another emotion. She screamed aloud and darted forward in defense of her precious gems.

"Stop! They are mine! How dare you—?"

Her questing hands touched the disappearing jewels, and, for an instant, a strange, electrical tingling coursed through her veins. Then the warmth of a human hand struck down her clawing fingers; the Voice cried sternly, *"Let be, woman! These go to those who need them more than you!"* Then with a quick change of tone, *"Stand still, you little hell-cat—"*

The Princess Lenore had flung herself forward upon the invisible thief, was groping with maddened fingers at a face, at eyes she could not see. Her hands touched flesh . . . her ears caught the swift sibilance of an indrawn breath. In all her life, never had Lenore been in such close contact with a man.

Strong arms gripped her shoulders and shook her fiercely. An angry voice grated, *"You greedy little fool! Are these all you live for, then? Cold stones? No wonder your heart is an icy barren, without sympathy or compassion. Don't you know what it means to hunger and be without bread, to want and be without hope, to love and be without love? In all your life, have you known only the icy caress of gems? Not this—?"*

And harshly, stunningly, the cries of the Princess Lenore were stifled by the crush of male lips upon her own. For an instant the world spun dizzily beneath her; it seemed a burning brand raced through her veins, crying a tocsin. A vast, engulfing weakness shook the princess; she fell back, trembling and shaken.

Then anger, fierce and bitter, cleared her senses. She opened her eyes . . . and found herself viewing an incredible sight: herself bent to the embrace of a tall, dark-haired man clad in the rough habiliments of the working class. A young man whose jacket pockets bulged with the jewels that had disappeared . . . a young man whose eyes were covered with a pair of strangely shaped spectacles. . . .

With a start, she realized she was seeing her formerly invisible guest in the rock-quartz mirror. At her gasp, the stranger spun, saw his reflection in the glass. With an oath he loosed her, seized a heavy stool, and hurled it at the glass. Its smoothness shattered into a thousand gleaming splinters . . . and once again she saw no one.

"*Vixen!*" grated the voice. For a few more seconds, jewels continued to leap upward into what the Princess Lenore now knew were hidden pockets, while she stood helplessly by. Then—she never could explain just *why*, but by some curious *absence* of sensation she knew—the boudoir was deserted save for herself.

The Princess Lenore stared long and wonderingly at what had been a mirror, the most perfect example of Plutonian rock-quartz crystal ever moulded. Then one soft hand lifted strangely to lips which still tingled . . . and something like a smile, a thoughtful smile, touched those lips.

Then, at long last, the Princess Lenore called the guard.

IV

Neil Hardesty peered anxiously at the chronometer on his wrist. He said, "Almost midnight. Brian, are you sure it was—?"

"Positive!" said Brian Shaughnessey stubbornly. "It was Dirk Morris, Neil. You've got to believe me. I know how it sounds. Crazy. But it was him."

"You didn't *see* him," reminded Hardesty gently. "You were under great stress. It might have been an hallucination, you know."

"Was that explosion," demanded Shaughnessey, "imagination? It blew the warehouse plumb from here to Tophet. If I'd been within five hundred yards, I'd have been blown to a bunch of rags. It was him, Neil. I'd know his voice any time, any place."

Vurrth said thoughtfully, "But Dirk dead, no?"

"That's what we *thought*," said Brian doggedly. "But he ain't dead. Either he's still alive, or his ghost—" A strange look swept his features. He stopped, glanced at the new leader of the group. "Neil, could it have been a—"

"I don't know," confessed Hardesty. "I honestly do not know. We'll just have to wait and see, Brian. But if he's coming here tonight, he'd better come soon. It's almost midnight. After the curfew, we won't be allowed to move on the streets."

"Particularly," interjected a new member of the Group, "now. The Overlord's guards are watching the streets like a pack of hounds since the theft of the Princess' jewels."

Hardesty said staunchly, "They can't blame that on us. We were all at work when it happened. Still . . . I'd like to know who did it. I'd like to know what became of them, too. Disappeared into thin air, the Princess claimed—"

"*The jewels,*" said a familiar voice, "*have been distributed where they will do the most good. Their wealth has been converted into food to fill the bellies of those who hunger.*"

All occupants of the refuge spun as one, seeking in vain the speaker. Neil Hardesty cried:

"Dirk! Then Brian was right! But . . . where are you?"

The voice from nowhere chuckled.

"That is what Garroway would like to know. I am beside you, Neil. Reach out your hand."

Hardesty did so. Briefly he felt a strange, warm tingling . . . then his hand met and gripped the hand of Morris. Tears sprang to the Group leader's eyes. He choked, "Dirk! Thank the gods you have returned ! We thought you were—"

He hesitated over the word. Morris supplied it.

"Dead? I am, Neil . . . so far as you are concerned."

All members of the listening party stirred uneasily. Vurrth grunted, and Brian Shaughnessey husked, "You see? I guessed it. A ghost—"

"That's right," laughed Morris in most unwraithlike tones. "A ghost. A galactic ghost . . . free to roam the System without hindrance or bar. Fleshless at will . . . but with a body if I so desire."

"You . . . you mean," choked Neil, "you can make yourself visible if you wish?"

"Not visible to your eyes, no. But I can render myself solid when it is necessary to do so. It was thus—" Morris laughed—"I stole the tax-collector's gleanings and the Princess Lenore's jewels.

Thus, too, I helped Brian destroy the munitions dump."

"I'm afraid," said Hardesty humbly, "I'm afraid I do not understand, Dirk. You are fleshless . . . yet you can make your body solid. You are alive, yet you call yourself dead so far as we are concerned. What does it mean?"

"I'm not sure," answered Morris, "that I understand it myself, completely. But here is the explanation as it was told me—"

He told them, then, of that which had followed his "execution" in the teleport. Of his meeting with Ptan Slador and Rima, and that which had transpired between them. To a group such as this, untutored and unlettered, it was vain to speak in technical language; he told his story as simply as possible.

"—thus," he concluded, "though the laws of Nadron forbid our using that adjacent world as a gathering-spot for our forces, the Ptan Slador and his fellows are sympathetic to our cause. They, therefore, instructed me in the use of their visor, as well as in the employment of certain strange faculties developed in me by my passage through the teleport.

"I am, you see, no longer simply a man of Earth, but a creature of two worlds. Through the machination of the teleport, my atomic vibration was altered to that of Nadron's galactic universe. But in the greater continuum of Space-Time, there remains a life-path which is mine, and typically mine."

"To this ineradicable life-path I am always free to return. Could you see me, you would note that I wear two odd bits of apparel. One, a pair of visor-spectacles secured to my eyes; the second, a force-belt which enables me to give my invisible body substance, when such is needed."

"To reach any given spot on Earth, I have but to go to its matching spot on Nadron, then turn the stud upon the force-belt. This sends a magnetic flux through my body, diverting it from Nadron's vibration to that of Earth . . . and placing me on my home planet. But as for visibility—" He shook his head sadly—"that I can never be again . . . to you. There are limits to the diversion of matter. My only *real* existence now is upon Nadron; my visits to Earth can be made only as a tangible and vengeful wraith."

"Then we can never see you again, Dirk?"

"Not on Earth. On Nadron, perhaps. The Ptan Slador has promised that when we have rid Earth of its tyrant, intercourse may be opened between our two worlds. Not before, though." Dirk pondered briefly. "There is one other way," he said. "A way

which I did not know of myself until a few hours ago. But I shall not mention it, even to you. It was an accident which happened in the Princess' boudoir. I must ask the Ptan about it when next I see him. Meanwhile—"

"Yes?" said Brian eagerly. "What do we do, Dirk?"

"You," ordered Morris sternly, "get out of sight and lay low! All of you! The incidents which have occurred today are but a mild beginning to what is to come. There is about to burst loose a reign of terror such as Graed Garroway in the depth of his infamy never dreamed possible . . . and I am its originator!"

"When this begins, Garroway's first logical move will be to herd all known living members of the Group together for questioning. You know the manner of his interrogation. You must be spared the pleasures of his rack and brand."

"So . . . hide! Go where you can, as swiftly as you can, and forget you have heard from me. But spread the word to all freedom-loving men that the time approaches when Earth and the solar system will rid itself of Garroway's shackles. You can do this from concealment?"

"We can," said Hardesty eagerly. "We can and will, Dirk. The hearts of millions are with us. If you will but tell us when and where to strike."

"You will be told from time to time. When word does not come, you will know to strike where a weakness has been driven in the enemy's defenses."

The voice of Dirk Morris was not pleasant now. It rang with the bitter hardness of forged steel.

"I will strike Garroway hard, and often, and everywhere! Where least he expects attack, there will I strike him. His armies will be robbed of leaders, stores, strongholds. I will make Earth a boiling hell for him. And when Earth becomes too hot a cauldron for his tasting, to the far planets of the System I will pursue him inexorably. This I vow by the bond of comradeship we have pledged!"

Hardesty asked, "Far planets, Dirk? You can leave Nadron, then?"

"Yes, There is no time for further explanation now, though. You must get into hiding immediately. For tonight begins the vengeance we have so long waited. Until happier days, then, my friends—"

The voice dimmed with the final words. An electric tenseness left the air, and somehow the assembled listeners knew their visitor had gone. Neil Hardesty shook himself.

“Goodbye, Dirk, and . . . good luck!”

Then, to his companions, “Well . . . that’s all. Now we know what to expect. Come on . . . let’s get going! There’s a lot of work ahead of us, as well as Morris.”

Already back on the fair soil of Nadron, Dirk Morris had retraced his wanderings to the home of the Ptan Slador. He approached its “doorway,” marveling again—as he had when first the Ptan revealed the entrance to his domicile—at the ease with which the portal merged itself into the surrounding landscape.

Homes on Nadron, Dirk had learned, were *underground*! That was why the eye beheld nothing but the beauties of nature when the horizon was scanned. The functions of living were carried on in cleverly constructed subterranean dwelling-places, leaving the entire surface of the planet a playground for the pastoral race.

The Ptan was awaiting his return, eager curiosity in his eyes. He looked up as Morris entered.

“Well, my friend?” he asked.

Dirk smiled grimly.

“Very!” he replied. “It has been a day Graed Garroway will long remember . . . if I give him a chance to do so.”

“Your plans were successful?”

“Perfectly. I assisted one of my erstwhile comrades in the destruction of a vital munitions storehouse, robbed a tax collector of his monies and the Emperor’s own daughter of her jewels, and distributed these where they were needed most . . . amongst the poverty-ridden families of the capital.” Morris chuckled. “There will be more surprised faces tomorrow when those poor devils wake to find themselves richer by a king’s ransom than when they sought their pallets.”

“Still,” said Slador thoughtfully, “you have really accomplished little. It would take a thousand men as many years to redistribute the tribute Garroway’s army has exacted from the people of your homeland—”

“That is true. But this is only a beginning; a few, minor incidents created to strike fear and awe into Garroway’s hirelings. Later, I will strike at more vital spots. And as for men . . . there will be not thousands, but millions, to rally when Garroway’s force begins to weaken.”

Slador nodded.

“Yes, that I believe. It is the history of mankind. Ever there have been millions to arise when oppression grows unbearable.”

A remembered question stirred in Dirk’s mind; something

which had vaguely puzzled him in his previous conversations with the Nadronian. He asked, "How is it, Ptan Slador, you know so much about the history of Earthmen? And how, even more strangely, does it come about that you of Nadron and we of Earth are identical in physical structure? Man's space-vessels have flamed to the farthestmost planets of our sun, but nowhere else was ever found a life-form similar to that on our own Earth."

"The Venusians resemble us, but are taller by many feet, heavier, slower of wit. The Plutonians again look like us . . . save for the fact that their skins are green. Yet you, not only removed from our solar Galaxy, but from our very ken of knowledge, might be a brother of my own."

The Ptan smiled slowly.

"And so, in fact, I am, Dirk Morris."

"What?"

"A brother many times and many centuries removed. Tell me . . . have you never heard of the land of Aztlan?"

"Azt—?" Dirk pondered, shook his head. "No. I'm afraid I have not, Slador. Where was it . . . or is it?"

"It was," answered the older man, "an island in the ocean you Earthmen now call the 'Atlantic.' The very ocean takes its name from our once-great nation—"

"Aztlan!" ejaculated Morris. "Atlantis! Of course! Now I remember. It is a myth . . . a fable . . . of an island which sank beneath the waves countless centuries ago! But surely, sir, you don't mean—?"

"I mean," Slador assured him gravely, "that legend is no fable, but veritable truth. Yes, my son, there *was* such an island . . . and we of Nadron were once the rulers of that island, and of your world."

"Its ancientness is not measured in centuries, but in millennia. How long we descendants of the Atlanteans have lived on Nadron, our archives do not tell. Those who fled hither from the holocaust that deluged our former home could not bring with them the impedimenta of a cultured civilization. We had to fight our way upward from semi-barbarism to our present state of living . . . and even yet we have not regained all the lost lore of Aztlan."

Dirk said humbly, "Great must have been the wisdom of your forebears to be able to transfer themselves from a sinking island to this place. I understand, now, your interest in Earth. It is more than just sympathy for us . . . it is a natural love for a land which once was yours."

"Yes," said the Ptan. "A land which once we ruled, and now have lost forever. But enough of this, my son. You were telling me of your adventures—?"

"Yes," said Dirk, remembering. "There was one thing that happened which I do not understand. In the boudoir of the Princess Lenore, Ptan Slador, I was visible for a few seconds! Why was that?"

Slador stared at him in astonishment.

"Visible! Impossible!"

"That's what I thought. But it is true, sir. I saw my own image in the Princess' mirror—"

"Mirror! Ah!" exclaimed the Ptan. "Now I begin to understand. This mirror . . . it was not plain, silvered glass? It was, perhaps, quartz?"

"Possibly," admitted Dirk. "I would not know about such things, sir."

"Undoubtedly," mused his advisor, "it must have been a rock-quartz mirror. That is the only Earthly substance of dual isotopic form. Its converse refractions hold and trap not only the normal vibrations of your system, but harmonic vibrations as well. Surely your scientists know this. Many hundreds of years ago, I know they experimented with the use of quartz substances in both light and sound transmission.

"But we are not so interested now in causes as in results. Do you think the Princess saw you in this mirror?"

"I . . . I am afraid so," confessed Dirk. "It was her astonishment that attracted my gaze to the glass. Of course, I shattered the mirror instantly. But too late to keep her from seeing—"

"If, of course," interrupted a cool voice, "she was not as bemused as yourself."

"Eh?" Dirk spun, flushing in swift embarrassment as his eyes met those of Slador's daughter. Rima's lips were lifted in a light smile which, oddly, was not altogether of amusement. "Oh, you mean . . . then, you . . . you saw?"

"You do let business interfere with pleasure, do you, Dirk Morris?" laughed the girl. "Yes, I am sorry, but I must confess to having been an innocent witness to your . . . momentary digression. It was inexcusable of me, I know, but I was so interested in your endeavors that I turned on the visor to follow your adventures, and—"

"Rima," blurted Dirk, "you must believe me . . . it was nothing. I mean, the Princess means nothing to me. I—"

He stopped, his embarrassment heightening with his color as

he realized how any attempt at explanation merely made an already awkward situation worse. It suddenly mattered to him terribly that Rima should have watched that impulsive episode between himself and the Emperor's daughter. He had no right, he knew, to think of Rima as other than a girl who had befriended him on an alien world . . . but somehow he already did. At first sight of her, a new meaning had entered into his life.

It did not soothe him that Rima turned away his explanation with a laughing shrug.

"Oh, but do not misunderstand me, Dirk Morris. It does not concern *me* in the least how you amuse yourself in your lighter moments. And your other exploits were, I must acknowledge, thrilling to watch . . . in a somewhat different way."

Dirk said miserably, "Please! It was an impulse . . . one I regretted immediately. The Princess Lenore means nothing to me . . . nothing. I shall never lay eyes on her again in my life. . . ."

V

In that one statement, Morris was mistaken. He made it in all good faith, but its truth was a matter over which he was not to have full control.

Two weeks passed. Two weeks filled with excitement and adventure. Two weeks during which Dirk Morris made good his pledge to the assembled brothers of the Group, now safely in hiding.

During that fortnight the Galactic Ghost . . . as soon he became known to the whispering citizenry of Earth . . . struck again, again, and yet again at the wide-flung forces of Black Garroway. Some of these blows were of a minor nature: the theft of hoarded gold, and the subsequent reappearance, as if by magic, of that gold where starving folk could lay eager hands on it; the mysterious disappearance of the Emperor's armored unicar scant moments before Garroway was to make an impressive "personal appearance" before the populace of the capital city; the inexplicable vanishment of a secret formula wherewith the Overlord's military experts hoped to subdue the gallant little guerrilla army which still held a salient against Garroway's might on the planetoid Iris.

Other occurrences were more violent . . . the kind that not even a ruthlessly controlled press can keep from public knowledge. The shocking demolition of the Overlord's strongest Asiatic fortress at Chuen-tzwan, keypoint from which his troops dominated all of

what had once been Southern China. At six-fifteen in an evening, according to testimony given by the commanding officer at the subsequent investigation, from out of nowhere had appeared a placard, advising the entire garrison to withdraw immediately from the fortress, advising its component members, moreover, to rebel against Garroway. This ultimatum had teeth in it. Midnight was set as the deadline for obedience.

When at midnight the garrison was still abristle with an aroused and suspicious force of armed men, from a dozen key points had broken out instantaneous fires. "Only a member of the Imperial High Command," testified the wretched officer, "could have known where to set those fires. Each was at a vitally strategic place: near a munitions bin, a water supply depot, or a warehouse of inflammables. We were helpless. In an hour the entire fortress was doomed. I was lucky to save a tenth of my men."

He was not so fortunate in facing Garroway's wrath. The ex-commanding-officer was put to death, along with every other ranking officer of the destroyed battalion.

This summary execution seemed bootless, though, when a day or so later a similar flame destroyed the spaceport wherein was cradled one quarter of the Emperor's fleet. It was revealed by those who escaped this debacle that it had been impossible to salvage a single one of the spacecraft. "They were not merely attacked with fire from without," one official avowed. "Each vessel was found to have been tampered with by someone of the crew. The hypos were smashed as if with sledges, vital running parts were broken or stolen. We were helpless!"

Helpless . . . helpless . . . helpless! These were excuses Garroway heard often, far too often, during the next weeks. It was a word he learned to hate fiercely, because it was so true. In quick succession he saw fall his outpost in Lower Africa, the well-fortified city of Buenos Aires, the central armaments depot on Lake Huron. And each time the apologies were the same. "We saw no one . . . heard no one . . . until it was too late."

Meanwhile, trouble had reared its head challengingly in the capital city itself. Here, as elsewhere, a frightened populace began by asking, "Why?" and rapidly changed its query to the more daring, "Why not?"

Rumor, despite Garroway's every attempt to still it, ran like quicksilver through the city. If the press was silent on a new disaster, a common man or woman walking the streets might hear at his elbow a mysterious Voice asking, "*Did you know that last*

night the fortress at Toulon fell? The city is freed of the Emperor's rule; already the people have declared their independence, set up a provisional government. You can do the same. The hour is near!"

Or a child, playing with his little companions on the streets, would suddenly stop and look about him strangely, listen as to an unseen speaker . . . then run home to his parents with the inexplicable words of a Voice: "*Yesterday the Territory of Mexico threw off the Overlord's bonds. In a short while you may do the same. Prepare!*"

Or an unwimpled nun, praying in the sanctuary of a forbidden cloister—Black Garroway had long since outlawed the Church—might hear the vengeful, whispered tones of an unecclesiastic visitant: "*On Timor the Cross is worshipped openly since the Overlord's force has been broken. Here it will soon be the same. Spread the word!*"

Thus the message was passed from person to person, and through a citizenry for decades apathetic to its own plight a new sense of hope and courage pulsed. Garroway's warriors sought in vain the refuge of the Group, upon the heads of whose members the Emperor had long since placed a tremendous price. But any common man who felt the urge to add his contribution to the rising tide of revolt could find that refuge with ease . . . for at his work, or by his side, or in the heart of a crowd would be a Voice to tell him its location.

So grew revolt like a tropic vine, reaching out new tentacles with every rising dawn, developing new strength with every failure of Garroway's heretofore supposedly invulnerable war machine, gathering new converts with every fresh disaster. And the mute whisperings of fearful people began to thrum with a new and heady tone . . . the spirit of daring, the renaissance of the flame of liberty. The voice of the people . . . which is the will of God.

Graed Garroway heard the bruitings of this voice, and was afraid.

Graed Garroway, whose boast had ever been he feared no man, heard the slow, insistent voice of revolt closing in about him . . . and was afraid.

For the first time in his brutal career he had met an enemy he could not crush with ruthless blows, destroy by force, obliterate with a flick of the hand. His armies had fallen twice . . . thrice . . . a dozen times before a phantom, a will-o'-the-wisp that struck and fled, leaving terror, awe, and desolation in its wake.

He was baffled and confused, was Black Garroway. A terror

was upon him that he could neither escape nor admit, for his confession of this fear to his commanders might be the last thing needed to send them, too, fleeing from his banner.

There was but one living soul to whom he dared admit this fear. That was his own flesh and blood, the Princess Lenore. Yet even to her he would not make an open avowal. His admission came in the form of blustering attack.

"Cowards!" he stormed, pacing the floor of his daughter's boudoir, "Snivelling cowards . . . the lot of them! All this nonsense about a Voice . . . a ghost that destroys strong forts . . . a phantom that passes unscathed through flame . . . *pah!* It's lies, lies . . . nothing but lies!"

Princess Lenore studied her father lazily. She was not of the type easily stirred to fear. Under other circumstances, born the daughter of a lesser man than Black Garroway, Lenore Garroway might have made a name for herself in the world, as an adventuress . . . a fighting-woman . . . a daring woman.

She drawled, half amusedly, "Lies? Are you so sure of that, my father?"

"Sure?" snorted Graed Garroway. "Of course, I'm sure! There is no such thing as invisibility! My scientists have proven that time and time again in laboratories. The fabled 'magic cloak' of invisibility is both hypothetically and actually impossible. Where matter exists, there must be either reflection, refraction, or occultation—"

The Princess yawned.

"I do not understand these high-sounding words," she said, "nor need I. Because, you see, I have met the Galactic Ghost myself."

"Nonsense!" fumed her parent. "It was an hallucination you suffered. Sympathetic reaction set up by nervousness. The medical examiner testified—"

"Sometimes," interrupted the girl coldly, "you allow your ultrascientific viewpoint to warp your better judgment, my father. You talk nonsense! Could a nervous reaction account for the theft of my jewels, or the shattering of my mirror?"

"I am not denying," protested Black Garroway stiffly, "that the . . . the Ghost visited you. Possibly he hypnotized you into believing him invisible. As for your broken mirror, that might have happened in a dozen ways—"

"The mirror was broken," said Lenore, "by the Ghost! Because I saw him reflected in it!"

"Furthermore, it is ridiculous to assume—" The Emperor

stopped abruptly, his brow congealing—"Eh? What did you say? You saw—"

"I tried to tell you," purred the girl, "at the time. But you were too concerned with the loss of my gems to listen to me. I told you I saw the Galactic Ghost. He was a tall, dark-haired young man—"

"Ridiculous!" puffed Garroway. "More hypnosis!"

"—with crisp, curling hair," continued the Princess reminiscently, "and a small, triangular scar over his right eyebrow. A very interesting young man—"

Garroway had stiffened at her words, but this time it was with a tensing of interest. He leaned forward.

"A moment, my dear. Did you say . . . a small scar above his right eyebrow?"

"Why, yes."

"A triangular scar? You are certain of that?"

"Positive. Why?"

"Because if you are right—" The Overlord left the sentence dangling; strode to the wall audio and crisped sharp orders into its metallic throat. Elsewhere in the palace a corps of underlings went into action, collecting swiftly the information demanded by their master. Within minutes there came a messenger, bearing a portfolio. This Garroway pawed through, selecting a photograph which he handed to the girl.

"Is this," he asked hoarsely, "the image you saw?"

The Princess Lenore took the photo, studied it, and nodded. "It is. I remember him well. Who is he?"

Graed Garroway laughed. But now there was a touch of hysteria in his laughter, and his deep-rooted fear struck new depths as he answered.

"His name is Dirk Morris . . . an underling."

"Dirk Morris," repeated the girl, "it is a pleasant name to the ears. Well . . . now that you know the identity of the Ghost, what are you going to do?"

Garroway said slowly, "I am going to do . . . nothing. Dirk Morris was put to death almost three weeks ago. The . . . the Galactic Ghost is a ghost indeed!"

The girl smiled. "Perhaps," she said thoughtfully. "But a ghost with very tangible body . . . and impulses. And, if I am not greatly mistaken, an Achilles' heel. Listen, my father . . . I will drive a bargain with you. For a certain price, I will deliver into your hands this threat to your power."

"Price?" The Overlord stared at her bleakly. "What price do you ask?"

"The life," said the girl, "of the Ghost."

Garroway's brow darkened.

"Have you gone mad?" he demanded harshly. "His life is forfeit the moment my men seize him!"

"But," pointed out the Princess Lenore sagely, "they cannot lay hands on him . . . without my help. Come, father . . . I, too, can be ruthless in getting that which I desire. Will you give me the man, Dirk Morris, and put an end to these depredations? Or must your fortresses continue to fall because of all on earth, I alone know how this phantom may be caught?"

Garroway's cheeks were mottled with rage; for a moment it seemed he might strike his own daughter.

"You . . . you ingrate!" he husked. "You dare bargain with the System's Emperor?"

"I dare bargain," taunted the Princess, "with my own father. And with a badly frightened man."

Garroway fumed at the taunt . . . but capitulated, as the Princess had known he must do. He lowered his hands weakly.

"Very well," he said. "I give you your price. Now, what must be done?"

"This—" said the Princess. And for a long time two remarkably similar heads, both in physiognomy and mentality, bent close together in conference. . . .

VI

"Tonight?" asked Dirk Morris. "You're sure, Neil?"

"This very night," swore Neil Hardesty. "At the Palace Royal. I got it on the highest authority. From one of the Imperial Guard, recently converted to our Cause. A grand meeting of the Emperor's strategy Council, summoned to discuss ways and means—" he grinned—"of apprehending the Galactic Ghost."

Dirk Morris smiled, too, though his features were invisible to his friend.

"The Ghost," he promised, "will attend the Council meeting. Neil, send out a hurried summons to all the Group. Tonight may be the night for which we have waited and planned. The situation has finally turned to our advantage. This is the setting we needed to strike our final, and heaviest, blow. A gathering of all Graed Garroway's most trusted lieutenants! What better time to bring an abrupt end to his tyranny?"

"Destruction?" asked Brian Shaughnessey. "You plan to kill them all, Dirk?"

"That is not the best way. Killing would immortalize Gar-

roway and—in the minds of many misguided people—forever brand the Galactic Ghost as an outlaw and murderer. No . . . I will not destroy the Overlord. I will make him appear ignominious in the eyes of his subjects . . . prove to all men that his vaunted powers are weak and futile. There is no weapon so strong as mirth, no blade so keen as scorn.”

Vurrth grunted heavily. “Maybe better you kill, Dirk. No trust Overlord.”

“My plans have been successful thus far,” pointed out the Voice of Conscience. “Play along with me a little farther. I think the end is in sight. Neil . . . be ready to send your forces into the Palace the moment I give the signal.”

“Right!”

“And you, Brian . . . see that the audio-cast stations are controlled by us in time to speed word to the populace that the Emperor has been taken,”

“Right, Dirk.”

“And you, Vurrth—”

“Me be on hand,” growled Vurrth, “to watch Overlord. No like this.”

Dirk laughed. “As you will. Well . . . until tonight, comrades!”

Again, as oft before during these past weeks, the assembled brothers of the Group sensed the passage of a tingling vibrancy, and knew their leader had gone back to that strange, mysterious other universe which was now his home. Neil issued orders. The Group disbanded.

Back on Nadron, Dirk Morris sighed and unlimbered himself of the heavy harness which necessity forced his wearing when he made his peregrinations between the two worlds. To the Ptan Slador he said, “Well . . . that’s all I can do now. I shall try to rest until the hour comes.”

“And then?” asked Slador.

“And then,” repeated Dirk slowly, “success . . . at last. If everything goes well, tonight will mark the beginning of the end. Earth’s greatest citadel will fall, carrying with it into destruction not only the Emperor, but all those upon whom the burden of his military power rests.

“With the fall of Earth, half the battle is won. No other planet is so tightly under Garroway’s control as ours. With the Overlord imprisoned, the other worlds will burst free of their bondage . . . the System will know again the joys of liberty.”

Rima said, "Dirk . . . you have laid careful plans for tonight? You have plotted every move you will make?"

"Under the circumstances, that is well-nigh impossible. I know only that the Emperor gathers with his staff. I shall have to make my entrance, then decide on the spur of the moment how best to accomplish my aims."

"You are sure—" hesitated the girl—"this is not a trap of some sort?"

"Trap?" Dirk laughed lightly. "How could it be?"

"I don't know. But the Overlord is no fool. He is a ruthless man . . . but he is no fool."

"He also," reminded Dirk, "thinks I am dead. The identity of the Galactic Ghost is, to him, a complete mystery. Were he to discover my identity, then perhaps I might have occasion to fear a trap of some sort, for . . . as you say . . . Garroway is no fool. He would realize, then, that the teleport brought about not death, but some sort of sinister change. But I am sure there is no danger. Ptan Slador . . . let us drink to success, and to the final reunion of our freed worlds!"

So they toasted a new life opening to all mankind. And the maiden, Rima, drank the toast with them. But even as she drank, her eyes were grave and thoughtful. . . .

Nevertheless, despite his claims of confidence, it was with some slight degree of trepidation that Dirk Morris prepared for his ultimate exploit later that night. This was, he knew, his boldest stroke to date. He had hurled his forces elsewhere with supreme confidence. But always he had avoided too-close contact with Graed Garroway. For in his heart of hearts he agreed with Rima. He knew the Emperor to be, in truth, no fool . . . but a cunning adversary of infinite daring and resource.

Still, the die was cast now. The Group's preparations were made; he could not let them down. He must pave the way for the general uprising which would sweep Garroway from power . . . or his own scheming into disaster.

Slador and Rima accompanied him to the spot on Nadron where his translation was to take place. It was a tiny wooded glade, bathed in the cool moonlight of the alien planet. In the thickets small night-things chirruped, and from somewhere a sleepy bird sang a listless lullaby. Dirk, standing there breathing the sweet, fresh air of Nadron found it hard to believe that the mere pressure of a switch on his belt would place him on the musty, lower levels of that architectural monstrosity which was

the Palace Royal . . . a towering structure of numberless stories . . . at the very topmost of which would be held the conference he pledged himself to end.

He held out a hand; first Slador, then Rima, gripped it warmly.

"Good luck!" said the Ptan.

And Rima added, "We'll be waiting . . . and watching!"

Dirk nodded, not daring to trust his thoughts to words, and depressed the switch. As oft before he felt a churning moment of vertigo . . . then he stood in a lower corridor of the Palace Royal. Not ten feet distant stood an armed guard. This man stirred restlessly, his head turning as if he felt the electric disturbance of Dirk's entrance. But when his searching eyes found nothing, he returned to the pacing of his post. Dirk slipped past him swiftly, noiselessly, and to the first of the long series of staircases he must negotiate.

The Palace Royal was equipped with elevators, but these he dared not use. The movement of an "empty" elevator would be token enough to the wit-sharpened Palace guards that the dreaded Galactic Ghost was in their midst. So he pressed forward and upward to the heights of the tower.

It was a long climb and a brutal one. The Emperor's palace dwarfed to shame the puny "skyscraper" attempts of ancestors a thousand years removed. Thus it was a weary Dirk Morris who finally attained the topmost flight, and there rested himself briefly before entering the suite which comprised the Overlord's council chamber.

The vagrant thought struck him that the Palace was poorly guarded, considering the chaos into which the Ghost's activities should have thrown the Emperor. But this, he reasoned, might be but another proof of the weakening of Graed Garroway's grip; so undermined was the structure of his empire now that not even in his own bailwick could he command the meticulous discipline he had heretofore exacted of his hirelings.

Rested at last, he moved toward the massive portal of the council hall. It hung slightly ajar; with no effort he inched it open and eased his still-invisible, but now substantial body through.

His entrance found the Overlord addressing a group seated in a semi-circle about the dais from which Garroway spoke. All backs save that of the Emperor himself were turned to Dirk. He moved forward silently, cautiously.

"—therefore, my lords and generals," the Overlord was saying, "it is vitally necessary that we apprehend this dastard, this criminal, who has so dared attack our government. Never until the

so-called Galactic Ghost is captured and put to death will we be free to—”

“—to continue,” said Dirk loudly, boldly, “your murderous onslaught against the rights and liberties of freedom loving people! Is that your meaning, Graed Garroway? Then abandon the thought. For truly, tonight your empire crumbles beneath you!”

“The Ghost!”

The cry lifted in the hall; all heads whirled as one. Eyes opened, wide in futile scanning, and jaws fell agape. And of all that vast, terrified assemblage, there was only one who did not freeze with sudden fear. That one was Garroway. Strangely, a smile seized his lips as he cried:

“Yes, the Ghost . . . as I had hoped! Guards . . . *lights!*”

Instantly the room, which had been cloaked in semi-darkness, blazed with the fury of a thousand beaming flares. And to his horror, Dirk Morris saw. . . .

. . . not only those who had spun to face him, tight faces wreathed in scowls, hands gripping lethal weapons . . . but his own image, reflected a hundred times from every nook and corner of the vast hall! From a hundred mirrors placed to reflect in their revealing rock-quartz surfaces every move he made!

Too late, comprehension dawned upon him! Rima had guessed aright . . . this was a trap, ingeniously set for him by the Overlord, and now sprung at the proper moment. The Princess had revealed that which she had seen; the Overlord was clever enough to take advantage of it.

There was but one thing to do, and that quickly! In a trice, Dirk’s hand leaped to the control stud on his belt, seeking to depress the switch that would return him to Nadron. But here, too, the Emperor had anticipated his move. His voice again cleft the stark, foreboding silence.

“Field!”

And instantly there hummed through the room a shrill, whining current. It took but the split of a second for Dirk Morris to discern its purpose. For when his own hand tightened on the switch . . . nothing happened! He did not find himself hurling the vibration-span to the safety of Nadron. He remained where he was, writhing in the coils of an electric agony that coursed through his veins like liquid fire.

It was then the Overlord laughed, his voice a grating triumph.

“You see, Dirk Morris, it is useless! My scientists have probed

the secret of your ghostly state . . . and you are snared in a net of their devising! Toss down your weapons!”

The grim purpose in his voice left Dirk no choice. Reluctantly he dropped to the floor the weapon with which he had hoped to capture Graed Garroway, stood still as grim-faced guards moved forward to grip him, bundle him to the dais wherefrom watched the smirking Overlord.

The tide was terribly turned. The biter was bitten!

VII

Dirk released the stud, pressure upon which had not brought him the escape he hoped, and gained some consolation in the fact that the pain faded. One thing he would *not* do, he pledged himself, was show fear or hurt before Garroway.

In as level a voice as he could muster he said, “So we meet again. Overlord of scavengers?”

Garroway laughed harshly.

“The trapped rabbit uses strong language still. You have profited little by your experience, I see, Dirk Morris.”

“On the contrary,” retorted Dirk, “I have profited much. And the measure of my profit lies in the dissolution of your empire . . . as you have learned in this past fortnight.”

Garroway said, “True, you have caused me trouble, I acknowledge it. But that trouble is ended, now, for I have discovered—at last, but fortunately not too late—the true nature of the machine in which I had thought to execute you. It was *not* a disintegrating machine, but one that distorted the atoms of your body, rendering you invisible.”

Dirk’s heart leaped; he struggled to maintain the impassive mask which was his face, revealed to the Overlord in a hundred reflecting surfaces of quartz. Then not yet had Garroway learned of the existence of Nadron, of the adjacent universe. That, at least, was something to be thankful for.

He said, “It was a clever trap you set for me, Garroway. You announced a council meeting which you knew I must attend; you surround yourself not with your generals, as was expected, but with guards. You listened to the advice of your daughter, used rock-quartz to make my body visible—”

“—and,” added Garroway complacently, “prepared an electric wave-transmitter that disrupted your own instrument, trapped you in our presence, and makes it impossible for you to escape.”

“Well—” His voice changed abruptly—“your puny attempt to

overthrow me has failed, Morris. As a fighter, I cannot restrain a certain degree of admiration for your effort, but as Emperor of the System, there is one thing I can, and must, do. *Guards—!*"

His voice was a thin snarl.

But as hulking stalwarts moved forward to perform his bidding, another slighter figure hastened before them to confront her parent. The Princess Lenore.

"Wait!" she commanded. "What means this, my parent? Why do you call the guards?"

"Return to your apartment, Lenore!" ordered Garroway sternly. "You have served your purpose. It is not seemly you should witness the judgment on this rebel."

"Have you forgotten your promise?" raged the woman. "You cannot kill this man. You pledged me his life!"

"Forget this foolish whim!" bade her father. "He is but an underling. Surely there are other men—"

"I want this one!" insisted Lenore. For a moment her dark, vivid eyes touched Dirk's with lingering ferocity . . . and despite the tenseness of the moment, the peril of his situation, Dirk Morris could not restrain the quick thrill of admiration and . . . something else which burned through him. His brain tossed in a turmoil of conflicting emotions. He understood, now, why an ungovernable impulse had caused him to sweep this girl into his arms that night in her apartment. It was because she was . . . she was his type of woman! A hard, gallant, ruthless fighting-woman who knew what she wanted and would adopt any measures to get it.

There was Rima on Nadron . . . true. He respected her. For her he felt—though he had known her but a short time—a great tenderness and affection. But it was not true love. It was a brotherly feeling; a comfortable confidence in her presence and companionship.

This girl, the Princess Lenore, alone could stir his veins to running fire; she alone quickened a hungry spark within him. It was mad . . . it was impossible . . . but true. He loved—and the knowledge of it struck Dirk Morris with brutally staggering force—he loved an enemy and the daughter of his bitterest foe!

Stranger yet . . . she loved him!

Now she was talking again, hurriedly arguing a case to win his life.

"It is not necessary to kill this man, my parent. It would be folly to do so. Think! On all this world . . . in all this universe . . . there are few men worthy of the name of *man*! Your court is a *melange* of smirking nincompoops and weaklings. Who amongst

them can match in strength and vigor the spirit of Dirk Morris? Which can compare with him in audacity and daring?"

"That," desponded her father darkly, "is why he must die. I cannot allow so dangerous a foe to live—"

"No? Have you forgotten the medical science of which your attendants are capable? Think, my father . . . were it not better to make slight alterations in this man's brain, converting him to a true and faithful servant, than to destroy forever the bravery in his heart?"

The words struck home. Garroway frowned thoughtfully.

"It is true," he mused. "A slight operation . . . a period in the Mental Clinic to erase from his brain-passage all thoughts of rebellion . . . would make him a new man. But it is too great a chance. Were anything to go wrong—"

The Princess Lenore gazed at him scornfully.

"I see. Very well, then—" With slow, deliberate movements she reached up, stripped from her raven hair the glittering imperial emblem which designated her a member of the Family Royal—"if such must be your decision, so be it? But I . . . I shall no longer confess myself a Garroway. If the word of the Emperor is so lightly to be given. . . ."

And this time she was triumphant. Her scorn hit the Overlord in his one most vulnerable spot . . . his colossal vanity. His dark eyes flamed with petulance. He snarled, "Oh, let be! No man shall say the Overlord retracted a pledge. If you must have this man—" He turned to Morris—"Well, what say *you*, rebel? Are you too proud to buy your life at the expense of rebellion? Or will you accept life at the price of a new existence of loyalty . . . to me?"

Dirk wavered, sorely tempted. Until this moment his life had been consecrated to a single Cause . . . the overthrow of Garroway's cruel empire. But now, suddenly, strangely, singingly, had entered into it another influence . . . love for a woman of matchless courage and beauty.

His attempts to destroy Garroway had failed. He was hopelessly ensnared, his cohorts could not save him. Years might pass before another Dirk Morris arose to lead malcontents in rebellion. Neil Hardesty was a good man, a strong and faithful friend . . . but he lacked the spark of genius that leads lost causes to success.

Perhaps it would be better, in the long run, to accept defeat . . . and in accepting it, accept also such share of happiness as this world had to offer. As the mate of Lenore he would live a new life,

all rebellious thoughts exiled from his brain by the surgery of Garroway's physicians. . . .

So he hesitated, and for those tense moments the fate of a world hung in the balance. But then . . . honor won! With infinite sadness, but with courage too, Dirk Morris made his answer. It was symbolic that he made it to the Princess.

"I am sorry, my Princess," he said quietly. "I know a great wonder, and a great pride, that you have made this plea for me. But . . . I cannot accept life on such terms. For me there is but one clear and unavoidable path . . . to go on. This path I must choose to glory or . . . the grave."

"Don't be a fool!" cried the girl. "Don't you see you can gain nothing by this gesture. You have no choice!"

Her words were sharp . . . but her voice was fearful. Dirk recognized this as he said, still softly, "Yes, that, too, I see. And, believe me, Princess, I am deeply sorry. But I have made my choice."

For an instant that seemed eternities, the Princess Lenore, she who had until a fortnight since known passion for nothing save costly baubles, stared into Dirk's eyes. Then a little sob broke from her lips, and she turned away.

And the Emperor nodded.

"Guards!" he said. "Take this man—"

It was a command that was never obeyed . . . an order never completed! For at that moment came interruption in the form of a violent blast that shook the entire council hall as a thatched shack trembles in a cyclone's wake. A column of living fire blossomed in the room; eyes burned and eardrums throbbed to see and hear the tingling of an unleashed and unguessable *force* turned loose in their midst.

And in the heart of this column, loose-girt in shining white, radiant as a goddess, but calm with the ominous quiet of powers unfathomable . . . stood the girl, *Rima of Nadron!*

It was Morris who first recovered sufficiently from the unexpected appearance to make a movement. A cry broke from his lips, "*Rima!*" He moved toward the girl. But her voice lifted in crisp warning.

"Back, Dirk! To touch this flame means death!"

Her words stopped not only Morris, but a group of the Imperial Guards who, as one, had now spun toward the visitant. They faltered, stopped dead in their tracks and turned to the Overlord for guidance.

Graed Garroway's black eyebrows were knit with rage and bafflement. He demanded hoarsely, "Who is this woman? And

whence comes she, that she dares enter the stronghold of the Emperor?"

It was incredible how forceful could be the tones of Rima. Her voice was dulcet sweet, but carried conviction.

"I am of a race that ruled this world before your ilk was spawned, Black Garroway . . . a race whose least remembered knowledge so surpasses your own that you are as pawns with which we play at will."

"I came because the evil in your heart has inspired you to do a great wrong . . . a wrong upon mankind that we, who once loved Earth, can neither condone nor allow. I came to free Dirk Morris, and to free Earth of a tyrant."

"Dirk . . . bid the Emperor step from his dais. He no longer rules this city or this System."

"No longer rules—" choked Garroway.

"The city has fallen," said Rima. "While in this tower you plotted for the life of a rebel leader, you have lost an empire. Listen . . . or better yet, turn on your visi-screens. Therein you will see I speak the truth."

In sudden, fumbling haste Graed Garroway turned to a vision-unit set in the auditorium wall. Instantly a section of the capital city sprawled before the gaze of those assembled. It was as Rima had foretold. No matter where the dial was swung, there reflected the same scene: people leaping, laughing, rejoicing in the streets . . . marching in vast, inchoate crowds, singing and cheering. Here and there were grisly evidences of the reason for their rejoicing . . . a knot of tumbled bodies gathered in the uniform of Garroway's forces . . . a burning pyre which had been an Imperial blockhouse . . . a torn, stained militiaman's cap lying in a gutter.

And now, to further the evidence, came the sound of voices, running footsteps, through the tower itself. And into the council hall flooded a host of jubilant freedmen, led by a trio at sight of whom Dirk's heart filled with gladness. The gigantic Vurrth, grinning from ear to ear and wearing a jacket snatched from a fallen foe . . . a jacket that had ripped up the back under the strain of the Venusian's mighty muscles. Brian Shaughnessey, bellowing loud greetings. Neil Hardesty, grave and quiet as ever, even in this hour of triumph, as he spoke to his leader.

"It is over, Dirk. You have succeeded here, too?"

Dirk said ruefully, "I have succeeded, yes. But it was not of my doing. Rima—"

"He has succeeded," interrupted the Nadronian girl. "The Emperor is deposed."

Neil said gratefully, "We awaited your signal, Dirk. When it did not come we grew anxious. Then Rima—" For an instant his eyes sought those of the alien girl, and there was a curious humility in them, an almost worshipful admiration—"then Rima came to us; told us the hour had struck. We issued our rallying cry. It . . . it was easier than we had dared hope. The city was like a ripe plum, ready for our taking. At every street-corner new hordes joined us. Even Garroway's hirelings abandoned their old leaders to follow the standard of the fabulous Galactic Ghost."

"Thus, you see," said Rima so softly that only Dirk could hear her, "you *did* succeed Dirk Morris. It was the Ghost whose spirit forged this rebellion. I but stepped in when the moment needed me."

Garroway, who had been standing at the vision plate, staring as a man transfixed at the image of his own downfall, now turned to his destroyers. His dark eyes were haggard, his sagging jowls suddenly no longer the harsh features of a ruler, but those of a defeated old man. He whispered:

"This, then, is the end? Very well—" A burst of his former defiance flamed in him. He forced a laugh. "You have won, Dirk Morris. And the death I promised you lies in store for me? Well . . . so be it. It has been a long game, but one worth the playing. Of one thing you cannot rob me . . . the memory that once I ruled the mightiest empire known to man."

But again it was Rima who spoke. Her voice was like a crystal bell.

"Not death, Graed Garroway. It is the right of none to judge that ultimate penalty on another. *Exile* shall be your fate. Those who know your system better than I shall decide which planet . . . or planetoid far removed from Earth . . . shall be your final refuge.

"Neil Hardesty—" she turned to the listening captain—"send him away. Your new government shall sit in judgement on him later."

Hardesty nodded, motioned to Shaugnessey, and the erstwhile Overlord was led away. With him were herded from the room, none too gently, those who had been his companions in the attempt to trap Dirk. Within a matter of minutes the hall was cleared save for a handful: Dirk and Rima in her glowing pillar of flame; Hardesty; the Princess Lenore.

In the Princess' eyes glittered a great defiance and a great sorrow. She asked; "And I? I join my father in exile?"

Rima looked at Dirk.

"Well, Dirk Morris?" she asked.

Dirk's throat was dry, his mind confusion. He said, "Must . . . must I then, be the one to judge, Rima? She saved my life . . . or tried to. Were it not for her—"

Rima said gently, "You love her. Isn't that what you mean, Dirk?"

Dirk's head turned slowly; his eyes met those of the Princess Lenore. And what he found there forced the answer from his lips.

"Yes, Rima. May the gods help me . . . I love her."

"That," said the Nadronian girl, "I know. And this also I know . . . that she loves you. Does she love you enough to join you in the new world which is the only one whereon you now can live? Enough to join you on Nadron?"

It was Lenore who answered that question. She said simply, "I do not understand your meaning, woman who dwells in a column of flame . . . but this much I *do* know. Where Dirk Morris dwells, there would I dwell also."

Rima nodded, satisfied.

"That, too, I had expected. It is well. She will make you a good mate, Dirk Morris. I wish—" There was a strange catch in her voice, a catch clenched teeth upon her lower lip could not quite stifle—"I wish you . . . much joy . . . in my lost, beloved homeland—"

Dirk stared at her aghast, uncomprehending. "Rima!" he cried. "Lost homeland? I don't understand—"

The maid of Nadron smiled wanly. Her voice, when she spoke, was infinitely gentle.

"Surely *you* should know, Dirk Morris, that one cannot pass with impunity from one universe of vibration to another?"

Dirk said, "You mean that you, as I did, have become a . . . a wraith to your own world? That henceforth you have no true existence on Nadron, as I none on Earth?"

Rima nodded quietly, sadly.

"But then," stammered Dirk, "if not on Nadron, where *is* your new plane of existence?" A hope caught and tugged at his heart. "Earth, perhaps? Our planet will become your new world?"

Rima shook her head. "No, Dirk Morris. The atomic pathway of Space-Time winds ever upward . . . not downward to a lower vibrational plane. When this protective shield, which already wanes—" She glanced with a swift, despairing apprehension as the iridescence dulled, and a crepuscular wavering dimmed its

outlines—"When this shield wanes, I shall move . . . forward to a bourne I cannot guess. A better world, perhaps, or . . . a worse—"

"No!" cried Dirk. He started forward, but within the blazing column a white arm rose in stern command.

"No farther, Dirk. To touch this field means death!"

"Rima!" cried Dirk huskily. "Rima, you shouldn't have done this. It wasn't required of you!"

"The quest of liberty," said the girl softly, "is the quest of all men, all women, everywhere. I was watching your progress, Dirk. When I saw you had been trapped, I knew someone must come to your aid, someone must carry out the plans you had so carefully laid."

"My father was too old. The Journey between our two worlds is . . . well, not without pain. So—" the girl smiled—"I came."

"You sacrificed yourself," cried Dirk humbly, "for us. It is too much. Earth can never repay you, Rima."

"I was repaid when you refused life at the expense of your own honor, Dirk. Now it is done I can tell you that on your decision at that moment rested the future fate of Earth. We of Nadron have never hesitated in dabbling in the affairs of others. Had you proved unworthy of our aid in that moment of trial, I would not have made the journey.

"And now—" there flickered in her eyes a shadow of thin, wondering fear as the veil of flame about her seemed to shudder—"the time has come for . . . parting—"

"No!" shouted Dirk, as if by the very strength of his cry he could withhold the inexorable. "No, Rima! Don't—"

His cry ended in a little moan. For at that moment the shimmering column trembled and . . . vanished like the flame of a snuffed candle. The last vision of Rima to be burned forevermore upon the retina of Dirk Morris' memory was that of a slim and gallant goddess, whiteclad, lifting a soft arm in salute . . . and farewell.

Then . . . nothing.

Dirk turned away, shaken. He whispered, "Gone! Rima . . . gone . . . no one knows where—"

Lenore said soberly, "*She* loved you, too, Dirk."

"No. She never loved me. Not as I love you . . . not as you love me—"

"It was a different kind of love," said the Princess.

"I will find her!" vowed Dirk brokenly.

Lenore moved to his side quietly; the warmth of her beside him like the courage of a voice in the wilderness.

“You and I,” she breathed, “together, Dirk.”

And suddenly, though there stretched before him a new and greater quest than that recently acquitted, Dirk was consumed with a vast impatience to know again the lips of the girl whose nearness was a heady wine, challenging him to dare any danger. He turned to Lenore.

“Together,” he agreed. “But first I must return to Nadron to lay the plans. You . . . you will come soon, my Princess?”

“Soon,” she promised. “Soon. But, first—”

She moved toward his voice. If she closed her eyes, she could not tell it was invisible arms that held her close, nor invisible lips that quickened upon her own. . . .





Revolt on Io

Death stalked the *Libra*. The Io-plunging space liner freighted a secret weapon, and the rebel Kreuther had vowed it should not arrive.

THE SHIP'S CLOCK BONGED DROWSILY THREE TIMES. Bud Chandler, the junior watch, glared at it languidly. "Thus," he yawned, "endeth the lobster patrol. Three bells, my fine bucko—and the soft, warm hay for you. Or—" There was a hopeful note in his voice. "Or would you like to finish out my trick for me? I'll stand double for *you* some night."

Dan Mallory said, "Comets to you, sailor!" And he rose, stretching the kinks out of weary muscles. His collar was open at the throat, his back ached from five solid hours in the bucket-shaped control chair. His eyes were strained. That was from peering alternately at glowing panels, through a *perilens* plate into the murky, blue-black space before the void-hurtling *Libra*, and back to the panels again. "There's a little thing called sleep which I'm going to grab some of. As soon as Norton shows up. Where the pink Cepheids—?"

"Tell you what. Finish my trick tonight, Dan, and I'll double for you *twice*. That's fair enough, isn't it?"

"Fair enough," said Mallory, "but not sufficiently enticing. Like an albino on a desert planetoid. Ah, here's our hero now! Welcome, Sir Relief! Dump it into the basket and let poppa go seek the arms of Morpheus."

"Who's she?" growled Rick Norton, Third Mate. His eyes





were puffy; he squinted and glared at the bright lights of the control turret. "Hell's howling acres, I'm tired! I just about got to sleep when—Oh, well. Log in order?"

"Directly." Mallory shot a curious glance at Norton. "Just got to sleep? How come? What were you doing up so late?"

"It wasn't official business," answered the junior officer curtly, "so it's none of yours. Let's have your log sheet." He slumped into the control chair, squinted through the *perilens* and made a few

tiny course corrections. Across the room, Bud Chandler's shoulders shrugged a reply to Dan's swift lift of the eyebrows. The Second Mate's lips formed a word. "Sorehead!" Mallory nodded. Norton *was* a surly son-of-a-spacewrangler.

But that wasn't any skin off his nose. He went to the chart table. Footsteps clattered up the Jacob's ladder, the door flew open and the Old Man stomped onto the bridge. He snapped, "'Zuwere!" and glowered over Mallory's shoulder, shrewd, space-faded eyes reading sense into the senior lieutenant's neat, precise columns. He jabbed a horny finger at one line of figures. "Sure o' that, Mallory? Velocity that high?"

Mallory said respectfully, "Yes, sir. All figures have been checked and double checked. We're point oh-oh-one on course. Forced speed, point thirty-nine above normal."

"Checked and double checked," said Captain Algase, "is good enough most of the time. But this trip is special. And vitally important. Forty thousand innocent lives depend on our reaching Io damn soon! Remember that, Mallory. All of you remember that."

The stern lines of his face eased a trifle. "It's been a hard shuttle, I know. A brutal, punishing trip. And we've all been under a terrific strain. But our difficulties are nothing compared to those of the garrison and the honest colonists of New Fresno. They're looking to us for aid, and we're bringing them aid."

"That is, someone aboard this ship is. I honestly don't know who that person is. No one knows except the man himself, the commander of the SSP Intelligence Department on Earth, and maybe someone at New Fresno. But he *is* on board, either an officer, sailor or passenger, and he is carrying to Io the plans for the new ray weapon recently perfected by the SSP Ordnance Bureau."

"Those plans will enable our New Fresno garrison to subdue this mysterious uprising on Io. That's why the *Libra* is traveling at forced speed. That's why we must redouble every normal precaution to insure our reaching the Io colony. That's why, too, we must keep our eyes open; watch even each other. What's the matter with you, Norton?"

Norton had started suddenly. Now he muttered, red-faced, "Sorry, sir. Sudden light in the visiplate. It looked like a meteorite."

"There's nothing there now," said the skipper.

But Chandler repeated, "Watch each other, Captain? I don't get it. We're all pledged and trusted members of the Solar Space Patrol, aren't we? We all live by the SSP motto. I don't see—" He fingered his breast insignia, that tiny, golden rocket emblazoned

with the words. *Order out of Chaos*. "I don't see why we should—"

"Because," explained the skipper grimly, "wherever there's an uprising there are converts to the new cause, traitors to the old. Where there are plans, there are spies to steal them. That's not a warning from H.Q.; that's plain, old-fashioned horse-sense. I fought through the Rollie Rebellion, you know. After the Grantland massacre I discovered that one of my own messmates was in the pay of the Mercurians."

"I won't say for sure that there is a spy aboard the *Libra*. But if there is, we must give him no opportunity to learn anything. Weary or not, we must remain on the alert at all times. But I needn't say any more. Finished, Mallory?"

"Yes, sir. Log in order, sir."

"Very good. You may retire. Chandler, you seem to be fagged."

Bud said, "One more yawn and I'll be a zombie."

"A gabby zombie?" sniffed the Old Man. "I'll finish your trick for you. Go get some rest." Still glowering, he plumped himself into the seat vacated by Chandler, cut in the intercommunications board, audioed the radio turret. "Is that you. Sparks? Wake up, you lazy scut! Any news from the Earth? Or Mars Central?"

The radioman's voice clacked metallically, "No, sir. I can't get through to any station. The rebel forces at New Fresno are still jamming the ether with static interference on all wave bands."

"Well, keep trying. Let me know if you get through. Well?" The skipper glanced back over his shoulder. "Well, I thought you two were tired? What are you waiting for? Want to stand another trick apiece?"

"No, sir!" said both men hastily. "We're leaving, sir!" They fled.

"Ain't he a whipper, though?" asked Chandler affectionately. "He growls like a terrier pup, but he's got no more bite than a cup of custard. 'Scuse me!" A gigantic yawn split his grin in two. "Must have been something I et!"

"The hell of it is," said Mallory ruefully, "now I'm off duty, I'm not a bit tired. I wasn't tired at all, really. Just had hardening of the panties from squatting in that seat so long. Got a cigarette?"

Chandler tossed him a package. "And don't swipe the coupon, either. Six thousand more and I get an electronic microscope. Well, you can do what you like. I'm going bye-bye and try to forget the waffles that bucket-seat has pressed into my hip pockets. 'Night, pal!"

His footsteps rang sharp little echoes on the metal flooring, echoes that hollowed as he disappeared down a corridor leading

to the sleeping quarters and Mallory turned toward the observation deck.

The tall First Mate leaned against the heavy quartzite pane staring into the depths of space through which the *Libra* scudded. The sight was no novelty to him, but as ever it awakened in his heart a sense of awe, a feeling of weird instability, a sort of pride in Man that he, of all the many, strange life-forms experimenting nature had devised, should so far be the only one whose imagination was so great, whose curiosity was so strong, that he had found a way to fling himself at blinding speed across the broad, unfathomable reaches of the void.

It was disheartening to realize that even though he had attained the stars, Man had not yet sloughed off the instincts and habits of the ape from which he sprang. Man's genius had blazed a path across the spaceways, Man's bravery had established new colonies from scorching Mercury to frozen Uranus. SSP lightships bridged the chasms between and beyond; even now the concentrated rays of faraway Sol were steaming the rimy crust off Pluto that Earth's miners might extract the valuable ores revealed by the spectroscope. But with the growth of the colonies, Man's ever latent cupidity had come into play. This past half century, thought Dan Mallory with a sort of savage anger, had been nothing but one long, bloody era of warfare between the forces of law and the outlawry of the greedy.

Now there was this uprising on the first satellite of Jupiter; Io. A charming little world. A pleasant Earth-like orb, spinning quietly about its gigantic parent. Up to this time, its natives had never been troublesome. Squat, muscular creatures, more or less anthropoid, except for the fact that their complexions had a pale, greenish cast and their eyes were double-lidded like those of snakes. They had an intelligence of .63 on the Solar Constant scale. Within a century or so the control board meant to award them autonomy; toward this end educators had been working ever since Io had been removed from the British Imperial Protectorate in 2221.

Trouble had sprung, both literally and figuratively, like a bolt from the blue. A cosmic *blitzkrieg*. One moment there had been peace and sweet content on Io; the next came a frantic, garbled message about "a rebel army . . . natives . . . led by . . ." The rest had been drowned in an ear-drum blasting burst of electronic static that had rendered all further communication impossible.

"Kreuther!" said Mallory thoughtfully. The affair sounded like one of Kreuther's moves. That power-mad genius, exiled from

Earth after the thwarted Lunar Campaign of 2234, was accustomed to strike in just this fashion. He alone, of all avowed SSP enemies, had the persuasive ability to win to his cause a horde of normally contented Ionians, the wealth with which to set into motion war's red machinery, the genius with which to disrupt interplanetary communications.

"But if it is Kreuther," thought Mallory consolingly, "this time he's bitten off more than he can chew. That new weapon—" He wondered, briefly, which officer, sailor, passenger, had been entrusted with the secret of the new ray gun's construction. Then he cast the thought from his mind. It was none of his business. It were better he didn't know.

It was at that stage of his reverie that a sudden byplay of movement captured his attention. In an instant, he had cupped his cigarette into his palm, stepped into a dark patch of shadow. A figure had glided from the passageway that led to the sleeping quarters, was now peering uncertainly into the observation deck. It was David Wilmot, one of the six passengers aboard the *Libra*.

Wilmot's thin face was pinched with nervousness; he coughed, a thin little hacking sound in the muted quiet, then put the back of his hand to his mouth. Dan stood motionless, his dark uniform blending perfectly with the drapes that concealed him. As he waited, watching, the door at the far end of the deck opened, a short, plump man in night-robe entered. Wilmot sprang forward eagerly. His whisper carried to Dan's keen ears. "Have you got them, Doctor?"

"Quiet, you fool!" Dr. Bonetti's forehead creased angrily; his eyeglasses reflected a subdued light owlishly. He fumbled in his pocket, passed something white to the other man. "Here! But not a word about this, mind you!"

"I know. I know." Wilmot seized the papers avidly, turned and fled down the corridor whence he had emerged. The doctor stared after him for a moment, shook his head regretfully, then disappeared. The door closed behind him softly.

"That's why, too, we must keep our eyes open—"

The skipper's words echoed in Dan Mallory's memory as he stepped from his hiding place, brow furrowed. What the devil was going on here? Could Bonetti have been the bearer of the secret plans; could Wilmot have been the spy? Had he just witnessed the sell-out of a traitor?

But before he could get his jumbled thoughts into order, a voice addressed him from behind, gravely, quietly.

"Rather confusing, eh, Lieutenant?"

Dan whirled to look into the face of Garland Smith, another of the *Libra's* passengers. He said, half pettishly, "You, Captain? What are you doing up at this time of night?"

The one-time officer of the SSP, now on the retired list, shot a swift glance at the glittering panorama visible through the quartzite plates.

"Night, Lieutenant? Night and day are nothing but quirks of speech out here, sleep a matter of habit. When you have lifted graves as many years as *I* have—" He sighed. "I was restless. And perhaps it is just as well. I witnessed the same thing you did. And strange things are going on aboard the *Libra*."

Mallory said cautiously, "Perhaps you're too apprehensive. Captain. Just because two passengers are sleepless like yourself, meet in the observation chamber—"

"They're not the only two who are still awake. The whole slumbering ship stirs with movement, my boy. A moment or so before you arrived I saw Albert Lemming stealing down the No. 2 corridor—and 'stealing' is the only word that describes his progress. Before that, Mrs. Wilmot had a secret rendezvous with some one in the smoking room; I don't know who her companion was. And Lady Alice has not been in her cabin all night."

The older man's eyes sought Mallory's, his gaze was piercing.

"My boy, I realize that I no longer rank you. But not so long ago, I was your senior. Once a Patrolman, always a Patrolman, you know. I feel we are in the midst of an intrigue too weighty for one man to solve. Perhaps the experience of an old officer may help. Tell me, is it true what I have heard? That someone aboard this vessel is carrying to the New Fresno garrison the secret of Earth's new ray weapon? If so, the mysterious actions we've witnessed may be espionage, agents of the Kreuther forces—"

Mallory said respectfully, "I'm very sorry, sir. I am not permitted to say anything. But I would suggest that in the morning you speak to Captain Algase. I'm sure he'll welcome your offer of assistance." His face clouded. Slowly he said, "Lady Alice. Where did you see her last?"

"In the reading room."

Mallory saluted, turned and went to the ship's library. As he walked he found himself hoping, why, he did not try to explain to himself, that he would find the room empty. But it was not. A single lamp was lighted inside. As Mallory pressed open the door, shadows danced on the farther wall; the wavering, unidimensional symbol of an upright figure spun and made swift, jabbing motions,

dropped. There was a sound of paper rustling, the rough scrape of calfskin on buckram. Then he was in the room, and Lady Alice was seated beside the refectory table, ostensibly reading a book. She glanced up with a little movement of surprise.

"Why, Lieutenant, what a pleasant surprise!"

Mallory stifled the impulse to say, "Pleasant?" He stared at the girl curiously, reminding himself for the hundredth time since she had come aboard this ship, six days ago, that as man and woman they had no common meeting ground, they lived on planes inordinately diverse. He was Dan Mallory, a Lieutenant of the Solar Space Patrol, a respectable, if underpaid, watchdog of law and order in man's widening circle of influence. Moreover, he was a *young* lieutenant. It would be years before he earned a major brevet, became an acceptable social figure. Even if a miracle were to happen, if he were to be selected into the envied corps of Lensmen, he would only be a super-cop. While she . . .

She was Lady Alice Charwell, possessor of a name and title respected for more than eight hundred years. Of course the title was now one of courtesy only; there was no Duchy of Io since the cession of that satellite to the World Council. But once her father had been manor lord of the entire globe; in the *Almanach de Gotha* her family name and crest still figured prominently.

All of which had little to do with the fact that her eyes were blue as the morning mists of Venus, that her limbs were white and straight and supple, softly feminine despite the mannish slack and shirt ensemble she affected, that her hair was a seine of sunlight gold that snared Dan Mallory's heart and quickened his breath.

He forced his voice to calmness. He said, "Lady Alice, don't you think it would be better if you were to go to bed? This—this staying up at night—"

Her laughter was warm and delicious.

"But, Lieutenant! Surely there's no harm in my reading myself to sleep?"

"Not a bit," agreed Mallory. He bit his lip. "I might suggest, though, that unless you're reading a book in the Lower Venusian language, it would be easier to read if the book were right side up. And—" He walked past her, swiftly, stared at the book which, hastily thrust back into the bookcase, still jutted out beyond its fellows. "And you might find more interesting reading matter than a tactical survey of Ionian military resources."

The girl's face was scarlet. She came to her feet indignantly. "Really, Lieutenant, you go too far! I don't see that it is any of your business."

"Lady Alice," said Mallory pleadingly, "a state of war exists on Io. Strange things are happening aboard the *Libra*, things the exact nature of which I am not at liberty to explain. If you will try to forget, for a moment, that I am a space officer—just think of me as a man—will you allow me to make the suggestion that you do absolutely nothing to lay your actions, your motives, open to any sort of suspicion?"

"I realize that as one who inherited a claim to the title, 'Duchess of Io,' you are deeply interested in current affairs on that colony. Others may read another meaning into your actions, though. At least one person has already hinted that you—"

Lady Alice's breathing was swift. "Who?" she demanded. "Who is this person?"

"I'm sorry. I can't say. But will you do as I suggest?"

There was a moment of silence. Then the girl shut the book on her lap, laid it on the table, rose. "Very well, Lieutenant. I'm a rather poor deceiver, aren't I? Nevertheless, I thank you for your well-meant advice." She moved toward the doorway, grace and poise in her every stride. And she turned there to smile back at him, her voice soft and unamused. "Lieutenant," she said, "you should lay aside your shoulder-straps more often. The man beneath is most—interesting."

Then she was gone, leaving behind her a red-faced, speechless, utterly chaotic Dan Mallory.

At breakfast, Mallory presided at the head of the table. Bud Chandler, arriving a few minutes late, stared at his comrade surprisedly.

"Why, Skipper!" he said, "What this trip is doing for your complexion! You look thirty years younger. Where did you get them pretty pink cheeks?"

Mallory growled, "Sit down, pal, and shut up. The Old Man's grabbing forty, and he deserves 'em. He and Norton ran into a loft-bound vacuole last night, had a hell of a time pulling out. Didn't you hear the commotion?"

"All I heard," complained Bud, "was somebody in my room snoring. It woke me up once, and what made me maddest was when I found out it was me." He nodded to the assembled passengers, sat down and made wry faces over his grapefruit juice.

Albert Lemming, the swarthy-skinned jewel merchant en route to his company's headquarters in New Fresno, stared at the acting-Captain curiously.

"A vacuole. Lieutenant? What's that?"

"A hole in space. Something like an air-pocket in the ether.

They aren't particularly dangerous, but the one we ran into was whirling in the wrong direction; if Captain Algase hadn't pulled us out, we'd have lost time on our trip to Io."

Mrs. Wilmot looked up. She was not, thought Mallory, a bad looking dame—if you went for that sharp, peaked sort of beauty. But there was a touch of cruelty to the cut of her lips, a pinched look about the nostrils, he didn't go for. And her eyes were too close together. She said, "That would be unfortunate, wouldn't it, Lieutenant? Losing time, I mean?"

There was a touch of some subtler meaning behind her words; Mallory couldn't decide just what it was. Maybe it was sarcasm, maybe it was fear, maybe it was mockery. He said, "I think we all share the desire to reach New Fresno as soon as possible, don't we?"

Her answer was unexpectedly sharp.

"I don't care if we never reach there. I'd rather die peacefully in space than—"

"*Susan!*" Her husband's voice sheared the end of the sentence into silence. Her eyes glared defiance at him for a moment, then she returned to the business of eating. Lemming looked embarrassed. Dr. Bonetti shook his head. Captain Smith coughed, suggested mildly, "Captain Algase must be an excellent astronavigator, Lieutenant. I didn't notice a single jarring motion. In *my* day, escape from a vacuole was a tedious, ship-wracking process. Of course—" His eyes wandered about the table querulously, "Of course there are so many new inventions nowadays. Improvements in all lines. Spacecraft, air-modifiers, armament—"

Mallory rose suddenly. He was half angry with the ex-space officer. Smith wasn't being very subtle in his effort to help matters. No doubt the old duck meant well, but—

He said, "If you'll excuse me, ladies and gentlemen, I must go to the bridge. Ready, Bud?"

Bud Chandler gulped, "*Ssswllwmcffy! Ulp!*"

"What?"

"I said, 'As soon as I swallow my coffee!'" repeated the Second Mate aggrievedly. "Can't you understand English? Let's go."

Lemming intercepted them as they passed his end of the table. He asked, "Lieutenant, I've been wanting to ask for several days—might I be permitted to visit the bridge? This is my first spaceflight, you know. I've always wanted to see how the controls are operated."

"Speak to Captain Algase," suggested Dan. "That's not within my power—Yes, Billy?"

The mess-boy had just raced in from the outer deck, trayless,

almost breathless. "Y're wanted on the bridge immejitely, Loo-tenant! Cap'n orders!" His eyes were as big as saucers. "Sparks just got a message through. A message from New Fresno!"

Dan had just time to notice, out of the corner of one eye, how this bald pronouncement affected the passengers. He saw the concerted motion that dragged them all to their feet as if they were puppets on a single string; saw the sudden gleam in Wilmot's eye, the worried frown that creased Bonetti's forehead, heard the swift, startled gasp from Lady Alice and intercepted Captain Smith's darting glances from one to another of the listeners. Lemming's voice quavered, "A—a message from New Fresno!" and Susan Wilmot laughed, a short, strident, triumphant burst of sound.

Then Dan Mallory saw no more. For with Chandler at his heels, he was pounding through the corridors to the Jacob's ladder that fed the control turret.

Captain Algase was no beauty even when garbed in his officer's blues; in pajamas and slippers he was something out of a nightmare. His bare legs were like cylindrical hair mattresses, his pajama slacks bulged at the equator as if he were concealing there a half watermelon. His eyes were red and gummy, his temper like something that could be poured out of a cruet. As Dan and Bud entered the control turret he was battering the bewildered radioman's defenses into oblivion with a salvo of verbal thermite.

"Message!" he was howling. "You call this thing a message! I'll have you stewed in slow gravy for waking me up like this, Sparks! Of all the damn, dumb—" He saw his two lieutenants. "Never mind, you two. Go back and finish your breakfast. False alarm."

"We've finished. Skipper," said Dan. "What's all the commotion?"

"This &!oe)\$ \$oe09!—" began Algase.

Sparks said miserably, "But it was Marlowe's hand on the keys, Cap'n! I swear it was. I know the message don't make sense, but you can't fool a bug-pounder. Every radioman has a distinctive sending style. Ask anybody. Even one of them wise-cracking Donovan boys. They'll tell you. And this was Marlowe's hand—"

"Let's see," said Mallory. He took the flimsy from his senior's fingers, frowned as he ran an eye over the cryptic symbols. "Numerals! All numerals. Sparks—?"

"It was like this. The static interference is still going on. The audio wouldn't bring in voice at all. But as I was twisting the dials,

I got this power wave from Lunar III, Joe Marlowe's station. It had a—a sort of cadence. I began putting down the things it sounded like, and-and that's what come out."

Chandler, peering over his comrade's shoulder, said, "Well, hell's bells, are you all nuts? It must be a code of some sort. Sparks, we use several numerical codes, don't we?"

"Yes." Meekly. "But that ain't one of them, Lieutenant. That don't fit no code in the reg book."

Mallory continued to stare at the message. It was long, and undeniably confusing. It read:

83.7-152-232.12-167.64-31.02-16-184-167.64-9.02-1-
126.92-144.27-186.31-50.95-16-175-47.9-16-14.008-4.002-
39.944-50.95-173.04-19-16-10.25-69.87-14.008-16-184-232.12-
186.31-39.944-127. 61-14.008-20.183-184-19-18631-11870-16-
1-74.91-127.61-14.008-74.91-28.06-32.06-181.4-14.008-
140.13-138-92-20.183-184-33.944-222-32.06-138.92-162.46-26
.97-126.92-140.13-40.08-10.82-26.97-32.06-31.02-8892-
14.008-16-184-16-14.008-6.94-79.916-39.944-40.08-195.23-
39.944-114.76-150.43-126.92-232.12-114.76-127.61-14.008-32
.06-126.92-19-88.92-140.92-16-127.61-12-47.9-16-14.008-16-
19-20.183-184-78.96-52.01-16.721-225.97-88.92-

"—and there it began all over again," said Sparks. "The same sequence. I agree, it's a code. But what good is a code when we ain't got the key to it. It ain't a simple word substitution cryptogram or a five-by-five. I studied them in the Academy, and tried them all before I brought this to the Captain. In other words, it ain't no good to us unless we've got the clue—and we ain't got the clue!"

Mallory said, "Billy said this was a message from New Fresno?"

"Well, he was wrong, as usual." Determinedly. "It come from Earth's moon. I know Joe Marlowe's fingers when I hear 'em. Damn, we was classmates for three years. Before I got crazy and gave up chemistry for key-pushing—"

"Chemistry!" Mallory started. "Did you say chemistry? Did you and Marlowe study chemistry together?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Why! Because that's the answer. Marlowe is nobody's fool. He knew you were the radioman aboard the *Libra*, prepared a special code, the key to which would lie in your brain as the memory of 'Auld Lang Syne'—Bud, look at these figures again. You notice the number '16' appearing over and over? Even in that thick skull of yours, '16' suggests—?"

"Oxygen," declared Chandler promptly. "The atomic weight of oxygen."

"And eighty-three point seven? Forty-seven, nine?"

"Krypton. And—let's see—titanium?"

"Right! Grab a pencil, pal! I think we've got a solution here. Jot these down—krypton, europium, thorium, erbium—Hold it!" He looked at his companion disgustedly. "Just the symbols, you dope! Don't you see? The symbols of the various elements employ every letter in the English language except 'j' and 'q'—and those are the two least commonly used, anyway. Start over. Krypton—"

"Kr," said Bud.

"Europium—"

"Eu."

"Thorium. Erbium—"

"'Kreuther'!" howled Bud. "That's it, Dan! Keep going!"

The message slowly scrawled its way onto paper. A word appeared, another, another. Then:

"Ten point twenty-five!" said Mallory. "Followed by 69.87! What the hell are they?"

Bud said, "Maybe he made a mistake? Boron's 10.82. Lithium's 6.94—"

"No. That's not it," said Mallory. He frowned. Captain Algase had long since wakened completely, was listening to his two juniors with glowing pride. Now he cut the Gordian knot.

"Chromium," he suggested, "is fifty-two point one, Dan. The reverse of the number that stumps you."

"Right! That's it, Skipper! And the meaning must be that the symbol is to be written in reverse. 'Rc' instead of 'Cr.' There aren't enough combinations to spell every word in the language unless you use some subterfuges like that."

"Which makes the word," said Bud, "'forces.' Go on, pal. . . ."

Mallory plunged into the heart of the coded letter. "39.944—"

"Argon," said Bud, "'A.'"

"114.76. Indium. 150.43—"

"Samarium. 'Sa.' Next?"

"Iodine."

"'I.'"

The message was finished. Bud handed it to Captain Algase. Mallory's curiosity was at fever pitch. He had not been able to piece the letters together as he went along; he had gained but a smattering here and there. He waited. The skipper read slowly, breaking the message up into coherent sentences.

“‘Kreuther power behind revolution. Heavy forces now threatening New Fresno—’”

“Kreuther, huh?” growled Bud. “I thought so.”

“‘Hasten assistance. Lane warns—’” The captain stopped, stared a moment, glanced swiftly at Mallory. There was a tight note in his voice. “‘Lane warns Lady Alice, cabal spy, now in *Libra*—’”

“Lady Alice!” blurted Mallory. The warmth of the control turret suddenly weighed down upon him; his brow felt hot, oppressed, as if some gigantic hand had descended upon his temples.

“‘Captain saith,’” continued Algase, “‘intensify protection of new secret ray.’” He crumpled the paper. “And that is all, gentlemen. Mallory—”

“Yes, sir?”

“Our fears were justified. There is a spy on the *Libra*. We must take no chances. You will arrest Lady Alice Charwell, place her under lock and key for the duration of the voyage.”

Bud Chandler muttered, “Where does Marlowe get that Old English stuff? ‘Saith!’ Why didn’t he say, ‘Says’?”

“Because,” Mallory answered mechanically, “there is no ‘ys’ combination in the elemental vocabulary. He had to say it that way.” The recollection of his unpleasant duty flooded back on him; with it came protest. “But it can’t be true, Captain! There must be some mistake. Surely Lady Alice wouldn’t be—”

“On the contrary, Daniel,” Algase’s voice was unusually gentle, “she would be. Once her family owned all of Io. It is more than likely that she should want to see the globe freed of Board control; regain her lost property. She could well be in league with Kreuther to overthrow the present government. According to this, she is.”

“Yes, sir,” acknowledged Dan dully. He was thinking of Captain Smith’s warning. Of the book Lady Alice had been reading, the book on military tactics. “Shall I make the—the arrest now, sir?”

“Yes, Lieutenant.”

“Very good, sir!” He turned and left the room. His jaw was white and rigid; a dull hurt was behind his eyes. . . .

A strained assemblage awaited his return to the mess hall. As he entered the room all conversation ended abruptly; an almost audible silence fell upon the group of passengers. Lemming half rose from his seat, opened his mouth as though to say something, closed it again, his lips a white slit against the green pallor of his

cheeks. Lady Alice's eyes were tense, expectant. Captain Smith moved forward to meet him. The ex-space officer's heavy frame was poised and ready; there was a note of subdued eagerness in his voice. He said stridently, "Well, Lieutenant—?"

Dan Mallory's patience with the older man was quite exhausted. He said curtly, but in a voice that did not reach the ears of the others, "Captain, I must remind you that you have no authority whatsoever on this ship! I appreciate your willingness to help, but—" Angrily. "For God's sake, man, stop acting like the hero of a Twenty-second century dime novel! Stop fingering your needle-gun, and—"

Smith looked embarrassed. His heavy shoulders sagged, and swift contrition swept over Mallory as the one-time officer said, "I—I'm sorry, Lieutenant."

Lemming had found words at last. He asked, shakily, "The—the message. Lieutenant? Was it—?"

He had to arrest Lady Alice, thought Dan Mallory. But he didn't have to humiliate her. To brand her eternally as a traitor in the eyes of her associates. And he still held doggedly to the hope that somehow, somewhere, had been made a dreadful mistake. He said, "The message was a routine transmission, Mr. Lemming. Of no great importance. Now, will you all be kind enough to disband, quietly?"

No one moved. Mallory, glancing at the faces about him, felt again that conviction that an interwoven webbing of intrigue entangled these passengers. He said, firmly, "That is not a request, but a command! You will all retire to the observation deck at once!"

The little group stirred. Mallory sought the side of Lady Alice, said, "I've been wanting to show you the ship, Lady Alice. Wouldn't you like to see it now?"

Her look of pleased surprise burned him. She said, "Why, Lieutenant, how nice! I would enjoy it."

They moved in a direction opposite that of the rest of the passengers. Even so, they did not escape unnoticed. From the corner of his eye Dan Mallory caught the glitter of Dr. Bonetti's spectacles, realized that the dumpy man was watching them shrewdly. And for a moment his eye met that of Captain Garland Smith; the old officer's head was nodding in mused speculation. He, too, had guessed Mallory's concealed purpose.

Only the girl herself seemed unaware that this was not merely a pleantry. Her shoulder brushed that of Mallory as they pressed through a narrow doorway; the soft, feminine warmth of her heaped reproach on the young lieutenant, as did her words.

"Lieutenant, I see you can take advice as well as give it. I had no idea, last night, when I suggested that you reveal the man beneath the uniform more often, that you would actually—"

They were alone now. And Mallory turned to face her, his voice purposely hard and impersonal.

"If you please, Lady Alice! It is my painful duty to inform you that you are under arrest!"

"Under ar—!" Her gasp ended in a burst of light laughter. She brought her hand to her forehead in mock salute. "Aye, Lieutenant! Brig, ho! But if I'm not too inquisitive, what charges are preferred against me? Murder? Of course, I do kill time most horribly, but these long trips—or could it be theft? I'm sure I've stolen nothing. Unless you mean—" She paused in sudden confusion; her eyes lifted to his; there was something written there, something breathtaking. Mallory had to hold tight.

"The charge," he said tersely, "is—treason! That message was from Lunar III, Lady Alice. It bore a warning from the commander of the Intelligence Division there, advising us that you had been discovered to be a member of Igor Kreuther's organization!"

The light died from the girl's eyes, the smile on her lips turned to ice. Her slim body stiffened, straightened. And for an instant Dan Mallory saw, with swift prescience, that this girl was not all charm and allure; that beneath her tempting softness there was a core, steel-strong, of strength and daring.

"Treason! Treason, you—you blind fool!" she spat. "You dare accuse me, Lady Alice Charwell, Grand Duchess of Io, Lady of the Rocket and Globe, Maid of the Golden Crest, of—of treason! Sir! My family ruled Io when that dominion was first discovered. For almost three hundred years the Charwell crest has—"

"Please, Lady Alice!" pleaded Mallory. "I know how you feel about it. To your mind, your actions were not treasonable. But Io is no longer yours; it is under the guardianship of the Control Board. And you mustn't talk this way. I will be called to testify against you; anything you say will be convicting evidence—" He touched her shoulder as though the warmth of his hand might melt its icy stiffness.

She shrugged herself loose disdainfully.

"I think we can dispense with the amenities, Lieutenant." The smile on the lips . . . the gracious invitation to 'see the ship' . . . the friendly hand of comfort. . . . There was scorn, anger, pain in her eyes. "It is my right to demand the privilege of communicating with my accusers, is it not? Those on Earth who—?"

"I'm sorry. No audio transmission is possible because of the blanket-static. The message came through in a code."

"I see. I must wait, then, until we reach New Fresno. Never mind, Lieutenant Mallory. You have said enough. I presume you are placing me under guard? Where—in my own quarters? Very well. If you will be kind enough to escort me there!" She laughed brittlely. "But, of course, you will. You couldn't let a traitor out of your sight, could you?"

In throbbing, bitter silence they moved down the corridors to Lady Alice's stateroom. There she spoke for the last time.

"The message that accused me. Lieutenant. Might I be permitted to hear the damning evidence? What did it say?"

There was no harm, thought Mallory miserably, in telling her that. The words were like acid, etched into his brain. He repeated them. She listened intently, frowned—and then a new, curious look stole into her eyes. She said, "But—"

"Yes?" said Mallory. "Yes?"

The look faded. She laughed scornfully.

"Hoping to hear more 'convicting evidence,' Lieutenant? I'm so sorry to disappoint you. Now, will you lock the door after me, please?"

Dan Mallory made a last try. It would cost him his rocket if anyone heard his words, but—

"Lady Alice," he pleaded, "I'm honestly sorry about this. I don't believe you are guilty. If you'll trust me, tell me your side of the story, I'll do everything in my power to—"

"You have done," said the girl tightly, "more than enough right now. Guard me well, Lieutenant!" With a short, mocking laugh she slipped through the door. Mallory waited a long minute, then turned the key in the lock. Its grate was a taunting sneer. He returned to the bridge. . . .

He couldn't help overhearing the end of the conversation. The runway that fed the control turret was narrow and metal-walled; it formed a perfect soundbox. Moreover, the door was ajar. The voice of Captain Algase reached his ears perfectly as he approached the room.

"—don't want to have to remind you again, Norton, that it is highly unethical for a space officer to become involved with a woman passenger. Especially with a married woman."

And the surly voice of Third Mate Rick Norton saying, "Very well, sir!" Then footsteps approaching the door, a figure confronting him squarely, Norton flushing, snarling, "Getting an earful, Mallory?"

Dan was in no mood for bickering. He said, "Don't mind me,

Norton. I've known for months you were a skirt-chaser. I don't consider it any of my business."

Norton's cheeks flamed. He said insultingly, "And I suppose you stand behind your stripes as you say that?"

"Forget the stripes." Mallory looked at his fists. "I stand behind these."

"Good!" Norton swung. He was a well-built man, a strong man. His blow packed dynamite—but it needed a target to set off the percussion cap. It found no target but a moving one. Mallory ducked, rolled with the punch, came up inside the Third Mate's guard to land a short, jabbing left to the midsection, a blasting right to the point of Norton's jaw. Norton gasped and collapsed soggily. Arms behind him readied out to support his falling weight; other lips behind Mallory whistled softly as Bud Chandler, coming up to serve his trick, witnessed the swift, decisive exchange of blows. And Captain Algase, releasing Norton's inert form, glared at Mallory.

"Well! Well, Lieutenant, I think you know we have rules against brawling?"

"Aye, sir!"

"But—" Captain Algase stroked his jaw speculatively, "In this case—Chandler, get him below! It served him right. Maybe he'll spend this rest period sleeping, instead of stirring up trouble amongst the passengers. Dan, my boy—"

He led the way back into the turret, completed the log record for the previous trick, handed it to Mallory, who had slipped into the control bucket.

"Twenty-four more Earth hours and we'll be there," he said. "And, believe me, I'll be glad when this trip ends. Trouble. Nothing but trouble from beginning to end. Long tricks and short tempers. Norton getting mixed up with that Wilmot dame—a damn' hussy if I ever saw one, and her husband a neurotic wreck. Smith bothering the blistering Hades out of me, wanting to 'help' catch spies and a thousand other—" He glanced at Mallory, who had stiffened at the word. His glance was sympathetic. "I'm sorry I had to ask you to arrest her, Daniel. But it's experiences like that that make strong men out of space officers."

"You have to be hard in this business. Crime hides beneath strange disguises. The sweetest smiles, the friendliest handshakes, the most honeyed words, may conceal—"

"If you please, sir!" said Dan Mallory, white-lipped.

"I know, lad. I've seen the way you looked at her. But remember—forty thousand innocent lives! Had she learned the secret of

that new weapon, our voyage might have been disastrous. From this distance she could have made a flight to Io in one of the auxiliary safety rockets, given the plans to Kreuther's forces. The very weapon we look to for salvation would have been used against us. Io might have become a nest of rebellion, instead of a peaceful member of the solar family. Now that we've snared our spy, the messenger—whoever he is—will be safe."

On the visiplat it was a glowing red spark, but in the *perilens* before him it was a gigantic orb dominating the heavens through which the *Libra* hurtled. Jupiter; monster of Sol's scattered brood, untamed sphere of writhing gases and vague mystery, itself a pseudo-parent emanating enough heat to make its far-flung satellites livable worlds. Soon they would fling themselves, they aboard the *Libra*, halfway around that gigantic orb, settle to the small body now wanly visible as a silver crescent.

Dan Malory punched a control-key savagely, felt the *Libra* shake itself into a slightly changed curve, turned to his superior.

"I'm not so sure of that, sir. Oh, I'm not trying to defend Lady Alice. Earth's Intelligence officers don't make mistakes—not mistakes of that magnitude, anyway. But there are other passengers I don't trust. Lemming. Wilmot. Dr. Bonetti. Why are they aboard the *Libra*? Why were they so excited when they heard we'd received a message from Lunar III? Suppose one of them is also a spy?"

"Or suppose," said the skipper, "one of them bears the secret of the new ray weapon. Wouldn't that one naturally be excited?"

"But the others?" Mallory inquired.

"I don't know. You may have something there, Daniel. I'm still taking no chances. I've put Aiken on guard at Lady Alice's door. If anyone tries to liberate her—What is it, Sparks?"

He snapped the query at the intercommunications box which was spluttering and growling. The radioman's tone was weary. "It's Mr. Wilmot again, sir. He insists on talking to you."

"Tell Mr. Wilmot I will see him at midday mess."

Sparks was stubborn about it.

"But he insists his message is important, sir. He demands to see you at once. Says—"

"*Demands!*" The skipper's jowls reddened. "Please tell Mr. Wilmot passengers do not *demand* favors of spaceship officers. I will see him at mess. That is all!" And he cut the communications board; turned to Mallory angrily. "That's why I didn't put you on report for slugging Norton. Wilmot's mad as a hornet and I don't blame him. Norton catting around after his wife—"

Chandler appeared, grinning. He said to Mallory, "What a sock, pal, what a sock! If that guy counts sheep in his sleep, he's going to wake up allergic to mutton. Wish I had done it. He's a grouchy son-of-a— What's biting you?"

Mallory said, "That's just it, damn it! I don't quite know. It just came upon me like a flash that someone said something funny . . . something that didn't ring true . . . but I can't remember what it was. If I could—"

"See, Skipper? It's got him, too. We're all going to be candidates for the strait-jacket squad when we finish this trip."

Algase smiled sourly. "Well, don't lift graves for the next twenty-four hours, that's all I ask. See you later, boys." He turned to leave; was interrupted by the buzz of the intercommunications box. "What, again! Yes, Sparks—what is it this time? If it's Wilmot again, tell him to go beat his brains out with a rusty bar! I'll see him at—"

Sparks' voice was harsh with excitement.

"It is Wilmot, sir! But I can't tell him anything. He's dead, sir! Murdered!"

Chandler said, "Murdered? Mi-god !" Captain Algase said a more effective and less printable thing which ended in, "Come on!" And he and Chandler pounded down the runway, their footsteps ringing on the Jacob's-ladder, disappearing in the distance.

Dan Mallory, his thoughts chaotic, sat chained to his bucket seat by the obligation of guiding the spaceship through the treacherous void. His fingers played over the control keys automatically; slowly the chaos left his brain and cold, clear, reasoning thought took its place.

Wilmot dead. Why? The first thought that suggested itself was Norton. Motive—jealousy. The desire to get Susan Wilmot's husband out of the way so—

But that was illogical. Norton was a skirt-chaser and a quixotic fool, but he wasn't a criminal. Murder was not in his line. Why else, then?

Because Wilmot had been the bearer of the formula? Had he been slain by a spy? And if so, by whom? Lady Alice was in her cabin, or at least—with a swift constriction of the throat—Dan hoped she was. He pressed the intercommunications button hurriedly; Sparks' face appeared before him on the visiplat. "Get me the M-13 plate, Sparks! The one in the stateroom passageway!"

The scene shifted. Aiken, a space gob, looked up as the audio before him glowed into life, touched his forelock respectfully. "Lieutenant Mallory?"

"The prisoner is in her stateroom?"

"Aye, sir."

"She hasn't been out?"

"Not for a moment, sir." The sailor added, "Might I ask the lieutenant what the h—I mean, what's going on?"

"Plenty!" snapped Dan. "That's all, sailor. Carry on!"

The glow faded. Mallory shook his head. No dice on that hunch. Then what else—?

The thought came so suddenly, so breathtakingly, that it literally lifted him out of his chair. There was but one possible answer! The reverse of his former theory. Wilmot was neither the bearer of the precious secret nor a spy. He was the "innocent bystander"; the traditional victim who, from time immemorial, has always been the one to get bopped. Somehow the nervous, jittery little man had learned *who* the spy was. He had attempted to communicate his knowledge to Captain Algase; the petulance of his own nature had rendered this impossible. And the spy, knowing that Wilmot had learned his secret, had—

Again he pressed the button. This time Sparks said, "Lieutenant Mallory? Have you seen Mr. Lemming? The captain wants to question him, but he can't be found anywhere—"

"Never mind that!" rapped Mallory. "Sparks, I want to know this. How was Wilmot killed?"

"Rayed, sir. Needled."

"I thought as much. And who was the first to find him?"

"Dr. Bonetti, sir. He's being held under suspicion. He confesses to having supplied Wilmot with drugs, sir. *Teklin-root*, sir. (That would be, thought Mallory swiftly, the package surreptitiously exchanged in the observation room). But he claims he didn't kill Wilmot—"

"Quick, man! Was Captain Smith anywhere around the radio turret when this happened?"

"Why—why, he *had* been, sir. But he left before Mr. Wilmot did—"

Captain Algase's face appeared in the visiplat beside that of Sparks. "Daniel, my boy, keep your eye peeled for Lemming. He's disappeared. Susan Wilmot has told us he isn't a jewel merchant at all; he's a jewel thief! Fleeing Earth to gain settler's amnesty on Io. Wilmot knew his secret, tried to blackmail him. Lemming threatened—"

"You're after the wrong man!" screamed Dan Mallory. "Captain, I see it all, now! The whole story. These other things have confused us. Sparks, swiftly—get me that M-13 plate again!"

The scene spun, changed dizzily. Once again Mallory was gazing down the corridor where Aiken had stood guard. But Aiken no longer stood before Lady Alice Charwell's door. He lay there, limp, still forever. A smoking hole charred his broad chest, crimson stirred sluggishly from the needle-ray's telltale trail. The door of the stateroom was open.

A hoarse bellow told Dan that the captain was seeing the same scene.

"*She* did it! She killed him and escaped!"

"No!" roared Mallory. "*Smith* did it! The man we should have suspected all the time; the man who *admitted* his guilt, but I was too blind to see it. Kreuther's spy. The renegade space officer—Captain, did you feel that?"

His space-trained senses had felt the swift, tiny moment of jarring repercussion that meant only one thing—that from one of the escape ports a life-skiff, an auxiliary safety rocket, had slipped from its base on the *Libra*, taken off into space!

"He's escaping! He's kidnaped her and taken off in a life-skiff. Bud! Take over! I'm lifting gravs!"

And for the first time in his career as an officer of the SSP, Lieutenant Daniel Mallory violated, deliberately, a rule of the Space Patrol handbook. He rammed the *Libra*'s controls into the robot hands of the Iron Mike, and abandoned his post in mid-flight!

It was not that he considered himself more capable than his captain or the second mate. His move was dominated by only one thing, the urgent need for haste. Safety rockets are, as everyone knows, blindingly fast. Much faster than the heavier, sturdier, cruising vessels that bear them like so many unfledged wallabies in a pouch. Give Smith a flying start and he would never be apprehended. And he, Dan Mallory, was much nearer a life-skiff port than the other officers up in the loft of the radio turret.

Slipping, skidding, stumbling in his haste, he raced to the nearest port, flung open the control-bar, threw himself into the small, tear-shaped vehicle lying there. There were regulations demanding that air, food, water supplies be ascertained before flight in one of these was attempted. But there was no time for such nonsense now. Each second seemed an hour as Mallory warmed the hyp-atomic motors of the skiff, rammed the button that opened the *Libra*'s outer shell, struck another that catapulted the safety-rocket away from its parent craft.

Then the dark of the womblike casing was gone, and he was blasting, under his own power, through space illumined with the candle-gleams of a trillion galactic motes. He set his range-finder

and attractor—but even as their needles found their objective, his searching eyes located it. A tiny, silvery gleam against the tawny night ahead—a gleam from the stem of which flared burst upon flaming burst of superheated light.

The rockets of Smith's skiff, hell-bent for Io!

Minutes *had* been precious! Vitally so. Already the little craft was countless thousands of miles before him. It was a wide margin that separated him; and in that margin lay the difference between freedom and peonage for forty thousand Earthmen, millions of Ionians, the difference between life and death for the girl Smith had kidnaped, the difference between victory and defeat for the Solar Patrolmen.

There was only one way to catch Smith. Recognizing the fact, Dan Mallory bit his lip, set his jaw stubbornly. Acceleration! Acceleration great enough to fling him across the yawning void, enable him to snare his quarry in tensiles . . .

And he was not strapped! No safety corset to hold tight the straining cords of his viscera, no yards of gauze padding to keep his wracked body from literally flinging itself to shreds. No—

He glanced about him hurriedly. There were piles of cushions, soft, plump, airy, scattered about the metallic cockpit. He jammed a dozen of these behind him, under him, about him. There was an oxy-helmet in its container beside him; he thrust this over his head. Its rubberoid halter settled about his chest, his shoulders. At least his straining eyes would not bulge from their sockets; by adjustment—if he could raise a hand—he could compensate accelerative force with pressure.

He drew a deep breath. Then, recklessly, wrenched the dial of the motor to full acceleration!

It was as though ten thousand fiery demons tore at his body with claws of flame. A weight, massive, imponderable, kicked the breath out of his lungs, forced it from his gaping mouth and flared nostrils into the helmet he wore. He gulped and strangled, righting to draw into a shrunken chest a breath of fleeing life. One hand moved—or tried to—to his throat in an instinctive gesture of distress. The hand moved a half inch from his knee, flung itself back into his stomach like a leaden weight.

The quick burst of nausea saved his life, because tortured ductless glands released a stream of adrenalin into his churning bloodstream, the miraculously adaptable body of Man rose once again above its normal limitations. Air crept into his lungs, his heart's tumultuous pounding no longer throbbed a threnody in his eardrums.

Still he could move with only the greatest of effort—but he could move! And his eyes, no longer blinded by the red mist that had drowned their sockets, saw the rocket-flares before him seem to literally stop in mid-flight, race back toward him!

A great exultation seized him. He was hardly aware that bright blood had burst from his nostrils, and that as he opened his lips to shout hoarsely the corners of his mouth drooled red. The craft he pursued whirled fiercely toward him; like flame-riding charioteers they jockeyed across the cosmic wastes. Smith knew he was there. Must know. But—Mallory's grin was the grimace of a gargoyle—he didn't have the guts to duplicate the young lieutenant's mad burst of speed.

He was depending on other weapons. Even as Mallory experienced the thought, a stabbing beam spat backward from the other rocket, a coruscating ray of silver that bore sudden death.

But Mallory had anticipated the move; his slow hand had been straining for seconds to forestall it. He pressed a lever—the ship slid into a dive. Another and the terrible pressure lifted from his limbs, his body felt suddenly light and buoyant, strength surged back to him with singing sweetness.

Again that stabbing ray searched for him. But Dan Mallory was no novice at the art of space warfare. He spun his craft into a cycloid Laegland arc, the lethal ray spent itself on indestructible space, and when Mallory came out of his maneuver he was within scant miles of his objective.

Grinning savagely, his hand sought the button that would smash Smith's ship into oblivion—then stayed! Lady Alice! He could not destroy her with Smith. Because now he knew, certainly and surely, two things. One of which was that she must be the bearer of the secret ray formula to Io. In no other way could you account for the fact that Smith had dared everything to kidnap her. She carried the secret, not in papers, but in her mind.

Were she to die—and might the gods of space forbid that his hand should destroy her loveliness!—Kreuther would still be the victor. For with her would perish the final hope of the besieged New Fresno garrison.

The other thing he realized was—

But there was no time for that now. His fingers spurned the ray button; found another. A jolt shivered the space-skiff from fore-quartz to rocket as his tensile beam reached across the closing miles, fastened its grip on Smith's craft.

Mallory's grin tightened. He cut motors. His tensile beam would contract like a rubber band, drawing the two ships together. Smith, feeling that beam upon him, unable to sheer it off,

would not be able to turn a lethal radiation upon him now. For the tensile beam was a perfect conduction ray. To destroy one ship meant to destroy both.

There was a groan behind him. Shocked, he turned. From the storage bin, bleeding from nose, ears, mouth, body twisted as though wrung through some gigantic mangler, crawled the missing jewel thief—Albert Lemming!

Mallory choked, sickened, "Lord, man! How did you get aboard here? Why—"

Liquid breath gurgled in Lemming's throat. Glaze filmed his eyeballs. "Tried to—" he panted, "—stow away. Wilmot dead—knew suspect me—hid—"

His head fell forward to the floor. Dan fingered his pulse, found there not the feeblest stir of life. Lemming, fleeing the dreaded breath of suspicion, had lost the more important breath of life. The miracle was that he had survived, even so long, the tremendous acceleration that had taxed all Mallory's space-trained, protected faculties.

And the two space-skiffs closed inexorably the gap between them. Mallory's quick brain leaped to the final problem. But before he could solve it, the small skiff audio burst into speech.

"Well done, whoever you are!" said the voice from the other skiff. "But you realize it won't do you any good?"

Mallory rasped, "I'm coming alongside in a minute, Smith. Stand by to surrender peaceably, or—"

"Or?" mocked the ex-space officer. "So it's you, Lieutenant? I might have guessed it. Your valor is exceeded only by your lack of foresight. I repeat, your hectic pursuit has done you no good."

"Never mind the talk. Stand by. This is the end," said Mallory. "This is checkmate, Smith."

"Not checkmate, my gallant young friend," corrected Smith. "*Stalemate*. True, you hold me captive in your beam. But to what end? You can't hope to take me alive. Whenever I choose, I can blast you and myself into atoms. And with us goes—" he paused significantly—"Lady Alice! Ah, you are silent. Lieutenant? I thought you would be. Of course, I'm an old man. These youthful romancings no longer interest me. But—bless us, she's much too beautiful to die, isn't she. Lieutenant?"

Lady Alice's voice interrupted.

"Take him, Dan! Don't think about me. I'm not afraid to—"

"You hear, Lieutenant? The girl's gallantry is a fit match for your own. But by this time, surely, you have realized that if she

dies, the secret of the new ray weapon dies with her. I think my leader's forces will have taken New Fresno before a second messenger reaches Io."

It was the truth. Knowing that, Dan Mallory groaned. This was a deadlock; one that neither force could break. He said slowly, "Well, Captain? What is your price for Lady Alice's safety?"

"My own," replied the renegade spaceman promptly, "and the secret she bears. I'm not an unreasonable man, Lieutenant. Even though—" bitterness edged his words—"even though the Solar Space Patrol did take the best years of my life, squeeze the heart out of me, throw my aging body into the discard like a dried pulp. No, I'm not unreasonable—"

So that was it. The self-pity of an aging man, perhaps a man gone off his gravs from the letdown after active years. That was why Smith had renounced his SSP pledge, gone over to the other side. Captain Algase's words rang in Dan's memory. "Where there are new causes, there are traitors to the old—" Even a spaceman was not exempt from human weakness.

"If Lady Alice will surrender her secret to me," the renegade captain was continuing, "with convincing proof that the formula she gives me is no lie, I will permit you both to live. I will allow you to keep one of these ships, return to safety—"

Mallory thought feverishly. It was against his every scruple to parley thus with the other man. But he could gain nothing by destroying himself and Lady Alice. Alive, there was always a chance they might win through to the New Fresno fort, carry their message, howsoever belated. If they died, Kreuther and his hirelings would surely win.

He said, "Very well, Smith. I accept. Give him the formula, Lady Alice."

Her answer was tense, vivid.

"No! No, Dan, don't trust him! He won't keep his promise. I know he won't!"

"We must take that chance." Grimly. "Tell him!"

The audio went dead. Mallory waited impatiently. Somewhere, lost in the immensity that engulfed them, the *Libra* surged through space on a mission now in the hands of the deadlocked three. So near that it was more sunlike than Sol, Jupiter swung in its titanic orbit about Man's luminary. The endless night was spangled with an infinitude of stars. The stars toward which Man, yearning, groped—while Man's feet still stumbled through the muck and mire of deceit. . . .

And the audio woke to life again, Smith's voice was triumphant. "Very well, Lieutenant. I am satisfied. I have finished the demolition of power and arms units in this ship. Its radio, however, still operates, I think it will sustain life for you until your friends arrive. I am ready to board your ship."

Lady Alice's cry broke in, "Be careful, Dan! He'll kill you! He—" There was the sound of flesh upon flesh, a silence. Then, "Well, Lieutenant?"

Dan said, "Come ahead."

"You will take your place," said Smith, "in the pilot's seat where I can see you from the moment I enter the lock. Put your hands above your head. Do not move or turn as I enter. If you do—"

"Come ahead," repeated Dan. The audio disconnected.

Dan sprang into motion. He believed Lady Alice's warning. And he was prepared to meet subtlety with subtlety; deceit with deceit. Not yet had Smith won. He bent and lifted the broken body of Albert Lemming. Hurriedly he jammed the oxy-helmet down over the dead man's bloody features. He grunted, "Sorry, pal!" as he hoisted Lemming into the pilot's chair, forced stiffening arms back and up in token of surrender. The high back of the chair, the padded cushions made the form hold its position.

He finished just in time. There was a scraping at the airlock. The two ships had drifted side to side now, and entry was a simple matter. Mallory ducked back into the compartment from which Lemming had emerged. His needle gun was in his hand, poised, ready. . . .

Smith entered quietly. He glanced once at the figure in the pilot's chair, said, "Don't move, Lieutenant—" and his arm raised. The girl's warning had been all too true. There was rankest treachery in the leveling of that gun, in the fiery needle dart that hurled across the chamber, burying itself in Lemming's defenseless head. The stench of charred flesh filled the room. The dead body wobbled, lurched to the floor. And—

"Now, *you* stand still, Smith!" gritted Mallory.

Smith whirled, his jaw dropping open. In his eyes dawned horror, disappointment, rage. He cried out once, raised his gun.

That was how he died. With his traitorous fingers lifted for the last time against a man who wore the uniform he had once worn . . . and had disgraced. . . .

Afterward, as they stood in the control turret of the *Libra*, watching a sober-faced Rick Norton plot the landing that would

bring new life to the Ionian colonists, swift retribution to the fomenters of the uprising, Bud Chandler whaled his comrade's back enthusiastically.

"Guy," he said, "in words of one syllable, you're terrific!"

"That's not one syllable," grinned Mallory.

"All right, then, you're a lallapalooza! But how the blue asteroids did you get onto the fact Smith was the guy?"

Dan said, "It came to me almost too late. It had been worrying me subconsciously ever since I had to—" here he flushed—"had to arrest Lady Alice. I knew that someone had, in conversation with me, said something that didn't ring true. And when Wilmot was killed for having discovered the truth about Smith, I suddenly remembered what it was.

"The night before we got the message from Lunar III, assuring us that Kreuther was behind the revolution, Smith had mentioned to me, quite casually, that he suspected there were on the *Libra* 'espionage agents of the Kreuther forces.' What he was attempting to do, of course, was ally himself with us in order to divert suspicion. But he tipped his hand by that little slip of the tongue."

Lady Alice smiled. She said, "Well, you're not awfully smart. Any of you. I knew he was the spy as soon as I heard the message from Earth."

Captain Algase interrupted, "Yeah, that message! I'm going to raise an assortment of hell about that. Causing us to arrest the one person on board we could really trust."

"And all," smiled the girl, "because of one, small, chemical symbol that you misread. Oh, yes, I understand now. I've seen the original. Bud—you went to the Academy, didn't you?"

"Why—why, yes."

"Your professor there must have been quite an old man, I mean your chemistry prof."

"He was. Ancient. But what has that got to do with it?"

"Everything. He taught you the old, the original chemical symbol for the element samarium. 'Sa.' The more common symbol, the generally accepted one, is 'Sm.' Now you see what a great difference that one little error makes in the meaning of the message. You read it:

" 'Lane warns Lady Alice, cabal spy, now on *Libra*. Captain saith intensify protection of new secret ray.' "

"And it should have been read," broke in Dan Mallory, understanding at last, " 'Lane warns Lady Alice cabal spy now on *Libra*—Captain Smith! Intensify protection—' and so on. It was a warning to you, not about you!"

“Exactly. Naturally, I was—well, indignant when I was placed under arrest. Afterward, I began to think it a good idea. Confined to my quarters, guarded, I would be completely safe. But unfortunately Captain Smith guessed, when *I* was arrested, that I was the bearer of the formula. So he killed my guard, seized the skiff, and kidnaped me.

“‘Saith!’” grunted Bud Chandler disgustedly. “I told you that word was phony. Joe Marlowe never used good English in his life when a cuss-word would do just as well. Hey! Where are you two going?”

It is doubtful whether Dan Mallory heard the question. There was one other little matter than needed clearing up—but soon! That was the way Lady Alice Charwell, in the moment of their mutual peril, had hurdled the amenities of speech, addressed him not as “Lieutenant,” or even as plain “Mallory,” but as—

“Dan,” he said. “You called me ‘Dan.’ It’s not right, Lady Alice. You shouldn’t do things like that unless you mean them. And I—”

“Suppose,” she asked, “I like that part of your name best. It *is* a nice name, you know.”

Dan Mallory’s big hands pawed futilely at the blue of his uniform. “So,” he croaked, “is Mallory. And—and I guess I’m completely crazy. I couldn’t ask *you* to share a name like that. I’m just a space cop. And you’re a Lady. A titled Lady.”

She said softly, “A Lady, Dan? There is no Duchy of Io any more. That’s a thing of the past, and my title is only a courtesy. And, oh—I’m so tired of courtesies. I’m a space cop, too, now. There’s nothing in the rules to keep two cops from teaming up, is there? Oh, you big, damn, dumb idiot—!”

Her face, smiling up at his, was inclined at just the right angle. They told him afterward that Rick Norton made a swell landing. He didn’t believe it. For it seemed to Dan Mallory that the whole cosmos was swirling and dancing and twisting upside down in a delirium of delight. . . .





Jessifer Rides Again

The System's Most Unpredictable Robot
Pins Back the Ears of Blaze Hogden,
Cruelst Space Pirate in the Void!

CHAPTER I

JESSIFER GOT US INTO THE MESS, BUT IT WAS CAP Hawkins' fault in the first place. As skipper of the *Andromeda*, he should have kept a closer check on the bridge. But what with the monotony of our long journey and the way the spaceships are equipped nowadays—with grav shunts and meteor deflectors and all that stuff—I guess Cap figured it was safe to unlap a trifle.

Anyhow, along about 8.03, Solar Constant Time, he came wobbling up to my turret and plumped himself into the only comfortable chair.

"Well Sparks," he said, "do you still figure you can punch holes in the good old Ruy-Lopez opening?"

"That," I told him, "depends on who's pushing the white pieces. If it was Gilchrist, now, or maybe the ghost of Capablanca—"

The old man snorted.

"Get out the chessboard and shoo the moths outa your wallet, Bert Donovan! I'm gonna teach you a lesson. Two credits a game?"

"Make it easy on yourself," I grinned, starting the usual routine.

The skipper's one of the grandest guys who ever navigated ether, but he's not half the chess player he thinks he is. I had made my nightly contact call to Pallas and was now technically off duty.

So I cut the switches, got out the set and pulled up a chair. The



old man appropriated white, as usual, lined up his warriors with grim determination, studied them briefly, then pushed one forward.

"Pawn," he announced, "to KR-four."

I stared at him.

"Maybe I ain't hearing so good? What was that opening you wanted me to defend against?"

"The Ruy-Loper," stated Hawkins with simple dignity. "An ancient and classical gambit which ought to be instantly recognized by any student of the game."



"That's what I thought," I said. "Only maybe I've been reading the wrong literature, 'cause every book I've ever seen, White opens the pawn to King's four."

"Stop quibbling," snarled the old man testily, "and play chess! Trouble with you is, Sparks, you ain't got no imagination. This is a little variation I invented myself. Go ahead. Your move."

So you know how chess is. We hunched over the board like a pair of stiffs on a slab and began concentrating. And every once in a while, one of us would get around to pushing a piece. But mostly we just studied the pieces and tried to look intelligent.

But pretty soon the fascination of the game did grip us and we forgot who and what and where we were, and what time it was, and in fact everything but the maneuvers of our little black-and-white armies.

I was only dimly aware that, after a while, someone else entered the turret quietly and sat down to watch. Later on, when the skipper was trying to think his way out of a corner I'd jammed him in, I glanced up and noticed that our audience now numbered two, the newcomer being Bud Wilson, second mate of our space-going scow.

Even then it didn't dawn on me that anything was out of the way. Until some time later, when the turret door swung open for still a third time and the voice of First Mate Dick Todd sounded off.

"Look natural, don't they? Who stuffed them?"

The old man, who had a bad case of goose pimples anyhow, feeling the cold breath of defeat blowing down his spinal column, looked up, bridling.

"Quiet, Mr. Todd! And I'll thank you to show more respect when making comments on your senior officer—Hey, wait a minute!" His eyes roamed the room suddenly. "What's going on around here? Who's on duty?"

Our three guests stared dazedly at him, then at each other.

"Wh-why, I thought Wilson was!" Todd said.

"Ross, aren't you?" Wilson put in.

"Why, Martin, I think!" Jerry Ross stammered.

"Martin," stormed the old man, "is in sick bay! Do you mean to tell me the *Andromeda* is hopping the Belt without a living soul on the bridge?"

"It's not as bad as that, sir," said Todd. "We're out of the Belt, space-bound for the Jovian system. I-I'll go topside right away sir!"

And he started for the door. But at that moment came an interruption. The turret visiplates glowed and the intercommunicating

audio rasped into sound. The sound was the voice of Chief Engineer McAndrews, more prickly with Scottish burr than a cactus bed.

“Sparrks,” he rolled, “is th’ Skipperrr oop therrre?”

“Wait a minute,” I said, “and I’ll ask him!”

“Nane of your lip, young mon,” growled the Chief. “Wi’ ye be kind enough to osk him what the devil’s goin’ on in the control turret?”

Cap Hawkins moved to the audio plate.

“What do you mean, Chief?”

“Ah! Is thot you, Captain? Weel, I rrregret to infairm ye, sorrr, that one of your mates has gone stark, staring looney! He’s been nigh drivin’ us daft doon here in the engine room. ‘Full speed ahead,’ he signals. Then, ‘Bank sharp left on the verticals.’ Then ‘cut in the velocity intensifiers,’ cooms the order.”

“I make a respectful query, as is my richt as chief engineer. ‘What for, sorrr, please?’ An’ does he onswer like a sensible creature? No, sorrr! He says only one thing. He says, ‘*Pwee*,’ Captain! ‘*P-weee*,’ he says. ‘*Pweeee! Whorroooh!*’ ”

My heart sank. Jessifer! And the others understood too.

“Sacred stars!” Todd gasped.

“That fool robot!” Cap Hawkins roared. “He’s grabbed the controls again! Come on, everybody, quick!”

And like five quanta whisking through space, the gang of us busted from the turret and hightailed it through the ship, up the ramp to the bridge.

Maybe you know about Jessifer? He was left as a legacy to Cap Hawkins by the skipper’s wealthy, scientifically minded Uncle Lester when that old gentleman lifted grays to the pearly gates. Jessifer had been a shocking disappointment to the skipper at first sight—and first sound. He wasn’t even a new robot.

He was an old and rather rusty 2189 model. An early, experimental android type with two arms, frontal visual apparatus, and manual control buttons. He was so out of date that he had knee-action stride instead of rollers, and his manufacturers hadn’t even equipped his footsoles with rubberoid plates.

But that wasn’t the worst of it. Jessifer’s creator had packed the animated tin can with an audio-diaphragm, into which had been tucked more old saws than you could find in a carpenter’s tool box. Jessifer was a sort of metallic Poor Richard. Every time he opened his yap, he gave with the moral mottoes.

“Be good and you’ll be happy.” “Honesty is the best policy.”

"Birds of a feather flock together." "The rolling stone gathers no moss." "Many a mickle makes a muckle."

These were but a few of the thousand-odd assorted adages Jessifer could—and did—haul out of his verbal grab bag.

So Cap Hawkins' first inclination had been to melt his robot bequest down into a wheelbarrow load of charm bracelets. Fortunately he had yielded not to temptation. And we were all sharing the profits now of Uncle Lester's strange legacy.

For it had turned out that Jessifer was more than a gabby robot. There was encased within his cranium a hand-forged box, which made of him an automatic radium detector.

By seizing the controls of the *Andromeda* forcibly a few months ago, guiding the ship to a tiny asteroid which was nothing more or less than a mountain of pure pitchblende, and snagging said chunk of wealth on our tractor beam, Jessifer had made each and every one of us financially stable.

The proceeds had enabled Cap Hawkins to buy the *Andromeda* from the Corporation and set us up in business as a crew of congenial and independent prospectors.

Now Jessifer was at it again. And while we had no objection to his leading us to still another gold mine in the void, we weren't overly enthusiastic about the time he had chosen to do it. Or the method he had employed.

There's something eerie and a little bit terrifying about scudding through space, with nothing more intelligent than an assortment of coiled wires, tubes, and gadgets pushing the keys of the control board.

So we headed for the bridge. And—just as we had feared—there sat Jessifer in the pilot's bucket seat, methodically plunging the bank-studs, eyes glowing with a pale green luminescence, meanwhile emitting those happy little "*puwees*" and "*puwaas*" and "*whorooms*" which were his way of heralding the nearby presence of radioactive ores.

"Now, see?" Cap Hawkins roared. "This is what comes of everybody deserting their posts at once! Todd, get him out of here!"

Dick Todd stared and turned a somewhat grayish shade around the corners of the mouth.

"W-who?" he stammered. "M-me?"

"Well, somebody!" stormed the skipper. "Sparks, you call yourself an electrician! What can you do about it?"

"If he had a plug," I offered worriedly, "I could unplug his motor—if he had a motor. Cap, there ain't nothing I can do about

it! The button that turns Jessifer off-and-on is amidships on his tummy.

"But with him sitting in that chair, I can't reach it. And when that robot's duty bent—" I shrugged. "But what's all the fuss about, anyhow? He'll quiet down as soon as he finds the radium for us. And we'll be that much richer."

"We-e-ell—" the skipper said dubiously.

But he had no time to make a decision. For Dick Todd, who had sprung to the perilens, now whirled to face us, eyes bulging.

"Skipper!" he cried. "The velocity intensifier!"

"Mm-m," grunted the skipper. "McAndrews said it was on."

"I know! But it's been on for two hours! We're nowhere near the asteroid belt any more! We're—we're blasting as fast as we possibly can toward—Jupiter!"

Jupiter!

My legs turned to water and started trickling into my shoes. Man's dominion over the Solar System is an almost complete thing. He has outposts on all the inner planets and on almost all the outer ones, including far, frigid Pluto. But there is one child of the sun upon which man has not yet been able to establish a colony.

The monstrous planet Jupiter, whose mass is so vast, whose gravitational attraction so powerful that even the latest and best-equipped spacecraft cannot approach it, without being gripped and dragged headlong to a swift and terrible death—that planet remained unconquered.

Even as this startling truth struck our minds, there came corroboration from the space through which we hurtled. Something like a shudder passed over the ship. For an instant my knees sagged beneath me, as extra gravs tugged at my frame.

Then the ship, like a released catapult, seemed to hurl itself forward at a speed even greater than that at which it had been traveling. And young Jerry Ross cried out almost hysterically.

"Dick's right! Jupiter's grav drag has caught us!"

Me, I'll admit I was scared witless. But the skipper has not spent thirty-odd years in space admiring the constellations. He knows things. And in a pinch, his reflexes act faster than those of any man I've ever met.

"No!" he thundered. "We feel the drag but we're not caught—yet! We can still pull out. But we've got to do it fast! Sparks—" he whirled to me. "You sure you can't reach that button and disconnect Jessifer?"

"Positive," I told him.

"A short circuit, maybe? Water?"

I shook my head.

"No can do, Skipper. Jessifer's as waterproof as a canvasback duck."

Cap Hawkins' jaw set grimly.

"Then there's only one thing to do. We must destroy him."

He tugged his flame pistol from his belt, raised it.

CHAPTER II

Space Warning

I groaned. The old man was right. It was a plain case of destroy or be destroyed. But I couldn't help thinking that the bubbling hiss of Jessifer's metal carcass, fusing into molten puddles, sang lullaby and good night to all our dreams of rank and riches.

We had never learned what made Jessifer tick. We couldn't possibly ever build another long-range radium detector to take his place. When the Cap put him on the hot seat, all our fond hopes would be bashed in the head.

Bashed in the head! That was it! With a yell, I clawed at the skipper's arm just as his finger tightened on the trigger-press. The unleashed bolt from the heat-gun flamed upward, missing Jessifer's rivet-tonsured scalp by inches, and spent itself harmlessly on a quartzite viewpane.

"Hold it, Skipper!" I squawked.

He stared at me wrathfully.

"What's the matter with you, Sparks? You gone off your gravs? Time's wasting. We got to do something about this radium-rampaging robot and do it fast, or—"

"But maybe we don't have to destroy him completely," I hollered. "Cap, inside his skull is a mysterious little box which contains his radium detection apparatus. If I can just fetch him a healthy wallop on that spot, disconnect a few wires or something—"

As I spoke I had been searching frantically for something, anything heavy. I found what I wanted now—a murderous looking monkey-wrench. I closed in on the unsuspecting Jessifer.

"Todd, get ready to grab the controls!"

"*Pweeee!*" squalled Jessifer. "*Bwaaa—bwup—bwaa!*"

I brought the wrench down with a resounding crash. Metal clanged. My hand tingled with the force of the blow. But a neat, triangular dent appeared at the base of Jessifer's skull, and he stiffened like the main attraction at an autopsy.

"*Pweeee!*" he wailed once more, and then in a thin, dim, querulous tone, "*Pwuggle! Cheep! Cheep!*"

And his hands fell away from the controls. Todd reached over his back, started pushing studs frantically.

"Get him out of there!" he yelled. "Get him out of the way so I can sit down!"

I snorted.

"Me and what other three derricks?" I asked. "I kayoed him for you. Now you rattle him out of the way!"

But Jessifer left us no cause for argument. For at that moment his eyes, which had dulled when I struck him, began to glow again dimly. He rose. Uncertainly at first, then with rapidly growing assurance, he swung toward the door of the control turret and stalked out. He looked neither to the left nor right. His arms were outstretched before him like those of a somnambulist.

We heard his metal soles clank rhythmically down the ramp into the bowels of the ship. As he disappeared plaintive little moans followed him.

"*Cheep!*" he garbled. "*Pwuggle—cheep!*"

But we had no time now to worry about Jessifer's difficulties. We had troubles of our own. Jupiter was perilously near. And though Todd was a good astrogator and the old man was at his side to lend him a helping hand, it was touch-and-go for a minute whether or not we'd break free of the mighty planet's ever-increasing gravitational drag.

But the *Andromeda* has good hypos. Todd jammed on full power, threw the jets into a left-arc reverse and gave her the gun. The old ship bucked and quivered. Her plates groaned in metal agony for a tense moment—

Then once again we were sailing smooth and clear through the ether. The old man swept grubby fingers across a dripping forehead.

"Nice going, Dick! And you, too, Sparks! For once you had a sensible brainstorm! But where did Jessifer go?"

He got his answer immediately. But not from me. He got it from the wall audio, out of which the voice of Steward Doug Enderby came wailing like the lament of a heart-sick banshee.

"Captain Hawkins! Captain Haw-kins!"

"Yeah?" snarled the old man. "What is it, Enderby?"

"J-Jessifer!" stammered our Better Homes and Garments expert. "Jes-sifer!"

"Never mind about him. You tidy up the bunks and let us take care of—"

"But that's just it!" moaned Enderby. "I can't, Skipper! He's

just ripped the sheets and pillow cases from every berth in the ship! He's raided the supply closets, too, and emptied them! He's building himself a *nest* in the middle of the laundry chute!"

"Sheets! Pillow cases!" The old man looked at me. "Laundry chutes! Sparks—"

"I don't know nothing about it." I said hastily

"Then go learn something about it!" ordered the captain. "You conked him—now go find out what's the matter with him! Hurry up!" And he got that two-weeks-in-the-brig-without-pay look in his eyes.

"Aye, sir!" I said, meekly, and left the turret.

Everything happens to me.

Well, why prolong the agony? It was just as Enderby had said. I located Jessifer halfway down the laundry chute, nestling coyly in an aerie he had concocted for himself out of every available sheet, pillow case, tablecloth, napkin and et cetera on the *Andromeda*.

He was crooning little murmurs of placid contentment, and when I tried to get near him, he reached out one steel-taloned paw and yanked off my shirtfront. One of the messboys, whom I had drafted to help me, lost an apron the same way.

I was stymied. I got a handbook out of my locker, "Maintenance and Operation of Android Robots," published by the Wertz-Ligon Human-droid Corporation, but I made the mistake of getting the book too near Jessifer.

While I was still leafing through the pages he reached out and plucked it from my hands. Then he did a crazy thing. He yanked the back off the book and hugged it to his bosom, disdainfully chucking away the printed pages.

That's when the answer dawned on me suddenly.

"Linen!" I said.

Doug Enderby looked at me as if he were afraid that I, too, might at any moment develop a yen for stray washcloths and towels.

"Come again?"

"Linen," I repeated. "When I conked him with the monkey-wrench I must have jiggled some of his wire innards. I changed him from a radium detector into a linen collector!"

"Ridiculous!" scoffed the steward. "Impossible!"

"You like to bet a clean hankie I'm not right?" I asked him. "No? I thought not. O.Q., wise guy, watch this!"

I stripped down to my cotton civvies and walked toward Jessifer. Just as I had thought, he didn't pay me the slightest never-

minds. He just continued to caress a soiled bath towel as if I weren't there. I strode right up to him, pushed the button on his tummy—and Mr. Jessifer went bye-bye without a murmur.

After that, I got a couple of the strongbacks from the black gang to haul him up to my turret. In spite of what the old man says, I'm not a bad electrician. So I took Jessifer apart to see how much damage had been done and what I could do to restore him to normal.

The whole job hinged, of course, on the contents of that little hand-forged box built in his cranium. It had a dent in it like a sailor's paycheck after a crap game. With some difficulty I pried the lid off, and stared aghast at the saddest looking accumulation of scrambled coils, tubes and wires I ever saw in my life.

Either that radium detection apparatus had been put together with magnificent delicacy or I don't know my own strength, because everything was a jumble now. A couple of springs popped out when I opened the box. The fragments of one broken tube tinkled merrily as they bounced around, cutting gashes in the tender foils of a goldleaf condenser.

About a yard and a half—or maybe it was a mile and a half—of wire came slithering out of the container, to twine itself around my wrist like creeping ivy.

A tridimensional jigsaw puzzle in amps and volts, that's what it was. But the very obscurity of it challenged me.

I got to work. I soldered here and I spliced there and I replaced a part in another place. I twisted and wound and rearranged. Some of it was guess-work and some of it was common sense. A little of it was logic and a lot more was plain, everyday hunch.

After my first attempt, I had three pieces left over with no place to go, which didn't look promising. But I backed away from Jessifer and turned him on experimentally with a long-handled forceps, just to see what would happen.

It wasn't a success. Apparently I had mis-hitched more than one set of wires, because I had entirely destroyed Jessifer's lust for life, liberty, locomotion and the pursuit of assorted objects. He didn't stir a step, nor did he make any passes. But his eyes did light up and he started to speak.

That in itself was the tipoff. Jessifer, as I have told you before, was in the habit of quoting adages. Somehow I'd shuffled his saws, because the advice he started emitting was a bit on the scrambled side.

"Ignorance," he assured me pleasantly, "is the best policy. A rolling stone makes a soft pillow. A fool and his money flock together. The wages of sin are soon parted. Birds of a—*glup!*"

I turned him off hastily, and took him apart again. And put him together again. And tried him out again. And—but why go on? It was a sad, sad situation. It seemed like every time I dissected Jessifer's activating cams, I discovered some new twist or wrinkle or gadget I hadn't noticed before.

I tried every wiring scheme in the books and I invented a few myself. But nothing I did returned the addled robot to his former state. Each time I completed a new reconstruction job, I would press his tummy button, oh! so hopefully . . .

Once he woke up with a yen for shoeleather. Another time his heart's desire was to form a collection of false teeth. (That was when Chief McAndrews got sore and offered to meet me in the boiler room after hours.)

A third time he went on the rampage after permalloy—just plain old-fashioned structural permalloy—which doesn't sound bad, until you remember that modern spaceships are lined inside and out with that extra-durable metal.

Jessifer romped away from me and succeeded in happily tearing off about eighteen square feet of the inner hull, before I managed to subdue him with a crowbar.

Meanwhile Cap Hawkins who had long since forgotten that if it had not been for my last-minute inspiration, Jessifer would be nothing but a puddle of fused metal, was ranting and fuming his way into a nice quiet apoplectic stroke.

"Blankety-blank sizzle socko, Sparks!" he snarled. "You got to get that there robot fixed! Do you realize we're six weeks out in space beyond the Belt, and so far we ain't discovered an unprintable penny's worth of radium? We're going broke, and the food's getting low, and we're short on fuel!"

"I'm doing the best I can, Skipper," I said. "But—"

"Don't give me 'buts'; give me results! You call yourself an electrician—" Then he calmed down and tossed me a worried, sidelong glance. "I'm sorry, Sparks. I know you're trying, but I'm on edge. You see, loss of money ain't the only thing we got to worry about."

"No?"

"No, there's something else. Remember that code message which came through from Pallas last night? Well, I didn't tell the rest of the staff and crew, but that was a warning to be on the lookout for Blaze Hogden. The Space Patrol sighted him flying

in-sun from Saturn a couple of days ago. They got an idea maybe he's heading for the Belt."

CHAPTER III

"Dead Men Tell No Tales!"

My brow creased. "Hogden, eh?" I said. "The privateer?"

The skipper nodded, glowering. "The dirtiest, showoffingest pirate who ever pushed space. A murdering rat, if there ever was one. He's airlocked a dozen shiploads of men, and all with that slinky, slimy, treacherous smile of his—"

"I know."

I didn't want to hear any more about the exploits of Blaze Hogden. I knew his reputation. I knew, too, that the *Andromeda* was no match for the corsair's ultra-modern space cruiser, the *White Diamond*, which could outrun, outmaneuver, and outfight almost any ship in space.

So I got to work again. But feverishly. I was beginning, I thought, to understand what made Jessifer tick.

One of the many gadgets within that mysterious cranium box of his was a variable detectoscope equipped with a small vernier. That had been smashed when I conked the robot, and I had repaired it but hadn't experimented much in the way of turning the needle.

Now I felt reasonably sure that the position of the vernier determined the element to which Jessifer was attracted.

I studied the dial more closely, observing it under a magnifying glass, and whooped aloud with glee when I discovered that it was scored off into ninety-three separate, tiny little marks.

Now I knew I was at last on the right track. Those marks must correspond to the elements on the periodic table, beginning with hydrogen and Number One and running all the way up to the newly discovered Number Ninety-three, ekalastron.

The stuff we wanted Jessifer to be sensitive to was radium: Number Eighty-eight. So I carefully pushed the needle over to cover the sixth fine line from the end. Then I rechecked my wiring, put the box back into Jessifer's cranium and audioed the skipper on the bridge.

He scowled when he saw my excited face.

"Don't tell me," he moaned. "Let me guess! Jessifer's loose again! Blast your jets, Sparks, for two credits I'd—"

"Set 'em up in the other alley, Skipper." I chortled. "This time I've hit the jackpot!"

You could almost see the old man's spirits rise from his eyelets to his eyebrows. "You mean—"

"Kee-rect!" I told him. "Come watch the fun. The curtain goes up as soon as you get here."

He was busting into my turret almost before the audio plate dulled. Behind him were Todd and Wilson. "Well, gentlemen, I've proved my genius again," I said modestly. "Jessifer is restored to normal. He's regained his radium finding proclivities."

"Y—you tested him, Sparks?" Cap said breathlessly.

"I don't have to test him. I know."

"I smell a Liberian in the lumber!" Todd sniffed.

"Okay, wise guy," I snarled. "That wrist-watch of yours has a radium-illuminated dial, hasn't it? Well, then, you'll see. When I turn Jessifer on, *you'll* be the object of his affections! Ready, Cap?"

And I pressed the button on Jessifer's tummy.

A dim light gathered behind the robot's eyes. His audio diaphragm burped indelicately for a moment. And then in a loud, clear voice he proclaimed:

"Empty barrels make the most noise. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. A boy's best friend is his mother—"

Cap Hawkins whooped with glee.

"You've done it, Bert! By golly, he's moralizing again! You went and done it!"

"Necessity is the mother—" began Jessifer. Then he stopped. The light in his eyes brightened.

"*Pweee!*" he said. "*Pweee—bwaaa—*"

"Radium," I grinned complacently. "He smells it. Get set, Dick. Here he comes, ready or not."

For Jessifer had indeed turned toward Todd, and was moving swiftly across the floor toward the first mate, arms outstretched.

"Better loosen the straps on that wristwatch," I advised, "or he'll take your arm off with it! He means well, but he's not house-broken."

Todd hastily began to obey me. For Jessifer was upon him now, reaching out toward him. But the robot never touched the wrist-watch. Instead, he reached his great metal paw into Todd's vest pocket, drew out a common, ordinary old lead pencil, and cradled it affectionately to his metal bosom!

"*Pweee,*" he murmured happily. "*Bwaa—bwup—bwaaa!*"

Then, as if struck by a sudden thought or attracted by some faraway scent, he turned toward the door.

"*Pweeee!*" Jessifer repeated joyously—and galloped out of the room:

Cap Hawkins stared at me, stricken.

"I—I thought you said he was fixed, Sparks?"

"But he is!" I yammered wildly. "I set the vernier. Th-there can't be any mistake! I don't understand why—Wait a minute! Is there radium in the hold?"

"One little chunk," the skipper said. "That rock he found for us inside the Eros orbit."

"Then that's what he's going after," I told him. "The pencil was a mistake. But shucks! I guess even a robot can pull a boner once in awhile!"

"But the radium's in a lead-cased room." Cap emphasized.

"Then maybe he's even more sensitive than he was before," I said. "I tell you I fixed him, Skipper."

Then the wall audio flashed on, and the startled face of Slops stared down at us. "Skipper!" he bawled.

"Yeah?"

"That robot, Jessifer—"

"Well, what about him?" Cap Hawkins bridled suspiciously. "Hah! So you've been stealing radium!"

"Radium, your Aunt Nelly!" bawled the cook. "That fool tin can on legs done busted into my galley and picked up my coal scuttle and ran off with it! How the devil do you expect me to cook without no fuel?"

Cap snapped off the audio dispiritedly and turned to me.

"Well?" he challenged.

I shook my head and tried to look happy, which I was not.

"Well, it's like I've always told you, Cap—"

"What do you mean—like you always told me? You've failed again, Sparks!"

"We shouldn't have a coal range in the galley," I backtracked hurriedly. "You know the old saying—there's no fuel like an oil fuel!"

What the skipper would have said then I don't know—and I don't much want to know. I suspect it wouldn't have been anything out of a Sunday School lesson. But at that moment came a violent interruption.

A high, whining percussion shuddered through the ship. Emergency klaxons clamored, and I lurched headlong across the turret with my mates, as whoever was on the bridge suddenly cut the *Andromeda's* velocity.

There came that giddy, weightless feeling of free-wheeling in

space until the ship's automatic gravs took hold. Then the voice of Jerry Ross, third mate, grated shrilly in our ears.

"Cap Hawkins!"

"Now what?" roared the skipper. "Don't tell me that robot's done something else!"

"It—it's not the robot," quavered Ross. "It's a strange ship! She fired a Haemholtz blast across our bow and ordered us to lay to. I've cut velocity, Skipper—"

Hawkins' face blanched.

"Strange ship? What's her name?"

But I think I knew even before Jerry answered.

"The—the *White Diamond*, sir!"

Blitzkrieg!

I had heard tales of the speed and efficiency of Blaze Hogden's pirate crew. But such space legends, told over a glass of fiery *tekil* in an Outland joy-joint, are one with the tales you hear of the exploits of roving pioneers and the derring-do of Space Patrol Lensmen. As such they are to be discounted.

But there was no exaggeration in the stories I had heard about Blaze Hogden. I have said before that Cap Hawkins was a man space-trained to react swiftly in an emergency. But before he could frame a suitable reply, before he could even devise a plan of campaign, even before he had moved a step from my radio turret, there came the gripping crush of a tractor-beam clamping on to the *Andromeda*.

The pound of mailed bulger fists echoed harshly on the airlock gates, then the asthmatic wheeze of that unit as we were boarded in midspace by strangers. Hogden and his men were in the ship. There was nothing to do but go meet them. And go meet them we did. Cap Hawkins led the way.

We found the boarding party, about twenty strong, standing in the leese side runway. They had already thrown back their bulger helmets to breathe the natural air of the *Andromeda*. A harder-bitten crew I hope it may never be my lot to cast my gambs upon.

The ragtag and bobtail of Earth's outlaw society, interspersed with a few sneaky chrysanthemums from Mars, Venusian giants and Uranian greenies, all armed to the incisors and looking very much as if they wished somebody would knock the chip off their collective shoulder—that was Blaze Hogden's gang.

Their leader, who was now nonchalantly slipping out of his bulky spacesuit, turned to face us.

"Ah! The captain himself comes to greet us! And two of his mates. You are extremely courteous, gentlemen. I presume"—he smiled meaningfully—"you are sufficiently intelligent to refrain from creating an—er—incident?"

"You're Blaze Hogden," Cap Hawkins said stonily.

There was no need for the pirate to answer. He had finished doffing his bulger now, and I gasped as I saw the emblazonment of that affectation which had given him his nickname.

From head to foot—literally from head to foot—the man fairly gleamed with those gems which were his particular love. The buckles of his sandals were made of diamonds. So were his gaiters and an ornate belt. There were diamonds on his fingers. A curiously wrought and intricate breastpin blazed with the hues of a thousand rainbows.

Even his ears, Gypsy-like, had been pierced, and in the lobe of each he wore a tremendous jewel worth the price of a king's ransom.

Thus Blaze Hogden, connoisseur and criminal, pirate and *precieux*, emblazoned himself even when following his outlaw pursuits.

Now he smiled suavely.

"I am indeed Blaze Hogden," the pirate told Cap Hawkins. "But I fear the advantage is yours, Captain. I have not the pleasure of your acquaintance. This," he stared about him appraisingly, "is a Corporation freighter, I presume?"

"It is," said the skipper bluntly, "not. This is my own ship, Hogden. Our own ship, I should say. The members of command and crew own it jointly and conduct it as a cooperative enterprise."

Hogden nodded, his ear-studs quivering lances of flame.

"But how convenient! One admires your social economy, Captain! Still—" His eyebrows lifted archly. "Still, speaking of economy, I presume you carry cargo? Now if I may be permitted to examine the manifest—"

"There is no cargo," said the old man stiffly, "and no manifest. It's too bad, Hogden, but your attack on this ship has been a pure waste of time. We carry nothing of commercial value."

Up to this moment, it had seemed to me that perhaps Blaze Hogden wasn't such a bad outlaw after all. There are some pretty decent ones, you know. Like Lark O'Day, for instance, a sort of Twenty-third Century Dick Turpin, who apparently roves the spaceways simply because he gets a kick out of it.

O'Day once quixotically waylaid the Corporation's largest and

most magnificent spaceliner for the single purpose of stealing one kiss from the gorgeous, newly crowned Miss Universe.

But now I saw that Blaze Hogden was no O'Day, no Turpin, no Robin Hood. He was an animal. Veneered with superficial culture, encrusted with precious gems, perhaps. But vicious at the core.

His eyes darkened at the skippers' words, glittering as coldly as the gems that bestudded him. His hands made restless motions at his side.

"In that case, Captain," he said ominously, "one may be forced to exact tribute in less—ah—pleasant ways. Quertzl, Mulgrave! Take two parties and search the ship! This man is lying!"

His voice snapped like the crack of a bow whip. His two lieutenants saluted smartly and led their parties down the ramp. Hogden turned to the old man.

"We will await them, sir, on your bridge. I wish to see your log."

And he herded us before him to the control turret.

Of course he found nothing. There was nothing for him to find in the log but Cap Hawkins' record of that one small chunk of pitchblende we had picked up a few weeks ago. And this was reported to him by his lieutenants, when they returned from their inspection trip of the holds a few minutes later.

The spindling Martian, Quertzl, simpered his report.

"Nossing below, ssir, but one small fragment of radioactive ore, worth maybe one ssoussand credits. We have transsferred it to the *White Diamond*, ssir. We found nossing elsse."

"You see, Hogden?" the old man said levelly. "Now, sir, with your permission we will continue on our way."

It was a good try. I'll give the skipper credit for that. But he must have known even as he said it that it was no dice. For Hogden was furious at his aide's report. His mouth was a thin white gash, and his eyes tiny pinpoints of malevolence. Even so, he maintained a pretense of suave good-will, and there was a note of false regret in his next pronouncement.

"I'm sorry, Captain. I am most truly sorry. But you are a man of the world. Certainly you must understand that what you ask is impossible? Blaze Hogden has escaped the—shall we say 'long arm of the law'—up to now, simply because he has seen to it that he does not leave behind witnesses to testify against him. One regrets, of course."

He shrugged and let his words dwindle off into silence. But it took no college education to see what he meant. He had stated, in

his typically stilted and elaborate language, the credo of his predecessors, those bold buccaneers who pirated the Spanish Main:

"Dead men tell no tales."

CHAPTER IV

Robot on the Rampage

Well—there it was. They say that when a man is hovering on the brink of the dark and nasty, his whole life unreels before him like a strip of microfilm. If my experience counts for anything, that's the old malarkey.

I didn't have any visions of the infant Bert Donovan prattling at his pappy's knee, nor of a pimply-faced me pursuing the gals and gallons in my good old college days.

All I could think of in this moment was how different things could have been if they hadn't been like they were! And if that doesn't make sense, neither did my thoughts.

But there flashed through my mind, with wistful regret, a recollection of the brief, happy months we of the *Andromeda* had known together since Jessifer had become robot first mate on our scow.

Just three months ago, Uncle Lester's legacy had enriched us, made us owners of our own ship, sent us forth into the void hopeful of fame and fortune. And now here we were, one tremulous breath short of being chucked through the airlocks *sans* bulgers, to become frozen clots of carcass in the nothingness that yawns between the worlds.

Jessifer, upon whom we had pinned our hopes and dreams, was a smashed, motionless, useless lump of metal who spent his odd moments tracking down old lead pencils and scuttles full of—

I think I gasped. It came so suddenly that I know I started. I'm sure a cry of understanding must have leaped to my lips, because Blaze Hogden whirled on me, alert.

"Careful, my friend!" he warned. "Any hasty movement and—"

His needle-gun was half drawn from its holster. At my side I felt Dick Todd tense. There was a challenging eagerness in his eyes.

"Okay, Sparks!" they seemed to say. "I'm game if you are. If you think it'll help to rush him—"

But that's not what I was thinking. My mind was racing a mile a minute, and I talked in my excitement. Perhaps that was a good thing, because Hogden mistook my apparent incoherence for terror.

"B-but, Mr. Hogden, sir!" I stammered. "All of us? Must we all suffer the same—p-punishment?"

It went over perfectly. The pirate stared at me shrewdly, and parried my question as I had hoped.

"Why?" he asked. "Why, radioman?"

"Th-there's something you should know!" I rattled desperately. "T-the captain hasn't told you everything. I'll make a bargain with you, Mr. Hogden. My life for the secret! If you'll promise me freedom—make me a member of your crew—"

Hogden smiled tightly and slipped his gun back into its holster. This was a language he could understand. The universal language of the good old double-x, at which he himself was a past master.

"One conceives that might be arranged, radioman," he said.

I knew that he lied as he said it. I was destined to share the same fate as my comrades. But if there was information he could get out of me first, he'd play ball for a bit.

"This secret, now. Just what—"

"This ship is equipped with the best and latest type of radium detector ever invented," I told him quickly. "We're the guys who discovered that pitchblende asteroid in the Belt a few months ago. Maybe you heard about us?"

There was no eager tenseness in Lieutenant Dick Todd's expression now. I could feel him drawing away from me in shame and disgust. Cap Hawkins' face turned a flaming scarlet.

His voice was thick with rage.

"Why, confound you, Sparks, for a sniveling coward!"

"Quiet, sir!" ordered Hogden peremptorily. "The young man interests me strangely. Go on, radioman. You were saying—"

"I-it's upstairs in my turret," I said. "A robot!"

"Robot?"

"A new kind of robot. It is attracted to radioactive ores. Will lead its possessor directly to them. Right now, its current is cut off. It's standing inactive. But if you'll have one of your men go up and press the small red button in his middle—"

Mingled doubt and greed were mirrored in the private chief-tain's eyes. I saw his thoughts struggle there for a moment as I waited breathlessly. Then cupidity won. He turned to an assistant.

"Do as the gentleman suggests."

"Aye, sir!" The man vanished.

Cap Hawkins turned to Hogden with a dignity I had not known the old man possessed.

"As the captain of one ship to another, sir, I have a small request to make of you. Before you do—whatever you consider necessary, I would appreciate having a few moments in which to expunge from the log of the *Andromeda* the name of this person whom I once considered a shipmate and a friend.

"I would not have it known that we numbered among us a traitor."

Hogden smiled.

"Calm yourself, Captain. I rather admire the young man. He, as all men of intelligence, is an opportunist—What's that?"

He started. "That" was the voice of an animated Jessifer, reaching us from the turret.

"*Pweeee!*" came the dim, faint, familiar sound. "*Pweeee—bwaa—bwaaa!*"

Then it came louder, accompanied by the clang of steel-shod feet on the metal ramp. Jessifer drew nearer.

"*Whorroooh! Whorroooh!*"

I tensed, too, but for a different reason. My entire scheme hinged on Jessifer's reception. If Hogden and his men were startled into just a few seconds quiescence, until Jessifer did that which I knew now, surely and certainly, he would do—

"*Whorroooh!*" bellowed Jessifer. The clatter of his racing footsteps grew louder and nearer. "*Whorroooh!*" And he burst into the room.

Did you ever see a robot on the rampage? Did you ever see a derrick on a ten-day drunk, or a Juggernaut crazy with the heat? Or an express train running wild on a maze of tracks with no guiding hand at the throttle?

That was Jessifer—except that he wasn't running wild. He knew what he wanted, and he knew where he was going. He smashed into the control room, eyes blazing, voice bellowing, arms outstretched before him.

He rammed a half-dozen startled pirate underlings out of the way, and charged squarely down upon the shocked, uncertain Blaze Hogden.

"*Whorroooh!*" he bellowed once more, ear-splittingly. "*Whorroooh!*"

With wild metallic enthusiasm he picked up the pirate chieftain and strained him to his armor-plated breast.

Then—"Pweeee!" said Jessifer contentedly. "*Pweeee!*"

Vainly the outlaw tugged at his needle-gun. Vainly he kicked and struggled and strained for release. Jessifer's arms were steel, and his embrace, though affectionate enough, was vise-strong.

Now had come the moment to act. I stepped forward to confront Hogden's benumbed followers.

"Put up your guns!" I commanded. "No—chuck them in the corner of the room. Over there. Todd, gather them up. If a single man of you moves a muscle, your leader dies! Hogden, tell them to obey me!"

The pirate, whose face was slowly purpling from an overdose of Jessifer's endearment, gargled wild agreement.

"Do-do what he says!" he yammered. "H-hurry up! This thing's crushing me! Get me out of here!"

"Got the guns, Todd?" I asked. "Skipper, take that lethal-looking plaything out of Hogden's belt. He might try another of his crummy tricks. Jerry, call McAndrews. Tell him to get the brig ready. We've got a party of twenty to entertain. And maybe a few more in the ship that's anchored to us."

I turned to Hawkins, grinning, and saluted.

"O. Q., Captain. The machines have landed, and the situation is under control!"

I'd like to be able to say that Cap Hawkins tottered forward uncertainly. But he wasn't that kind of a guy. All he had needed was a break. Now the break had come, and he was complete master of the situation. His commands were like the spat of machine-gun bullets. In less time than it would take to tell it, our erstwhile attackers were so much trussed beef for the storage bin.

All but Blaze Hogden. Hogden was still securely cradled in Jessifer's arms. Dick Todd jerked a thumb in his direction. "How about the walking jewelry store, Skipper?"

Cap Hawkins permitted himself one of his rare grins.

"We-e-ell, let's let him play with Jessifer for a few minutes longer," he suggested. "They seem to be very fond of each other. That right, Jessifer?"

"*Pweee!*" said Jessifer happily.

And that was that.

Afterward, with the two-dozen members of the *White Diamond's* crew and command locked in the *Andromeda's* brig, and the pirate ship itself in tow on our aft tractor beam for the short hop to Mars and justice, the skipper called time out for explanations.

"I owe you an apology, Sparks," he confessed. "But one that I'll never be able to make proper, 'cause it ain't an apology for something I *said*, but for something I *thought*."

"Now I see that you knew what you were doing all the time. Somehow you knew that Jessifer would make a beeline for Blaze

Hogden. Only—why? Jessifer was out of kilter. You saw that yourself. How did you know—”

“I didn’t,” I said. “But I should have, when we discovered that though I set the vernier to the sixth notch on the element dial, Jessifer didn’t turn into a radium detector again. I suppose I’d had so many failures, I thought this was just another in a long series. The solution didn’t dawn on me till long afterward. Until it was almost too late.”

“But radium is element Number Eighty-eight,” said the skipper. “It’s the sixth from the end.”

“That’s right. But it’s not the sixth from the beginning! I fixed Jessifer okay, Skipper. The only trouble was—I read the vernier the wrong way! I should have started counting notches from the other end!”

The skipper’s jaw dropped.

“Glory be!” he said. “I get it now! Element Number Six!”

“Hmm-hmm!” I nodded. “I guess we were all pretty stupid, but it paid off in the end. We didn’t find radium this trip, but we’ve captured Blaze Hogden and his crew. The rewards offered for them ought to be worth plenty. Not to mention those rocks Hogden was dressed in! I expect we’ll get our cut on those.”

Todd moaned feebly.

“Excuse me for being a cretin, Sparks. But would you and the Skipper mind sharing your little secret? What’s all this about Element Number Six? And why didn’t Jessifer work right? And why did he come hightailing it for Hogden and pick him up?”

I winked at the old man.

“What this ship needs,” I chuckled, “is a first mate with brains. Don’t you see, Todd? Jessifer was responsive to the stuff in lead pencils—graphite. And to the stuff in coal scuttles—coal.

“So it stood to reason he was going to be responsive to that wagonload of stuff Hogden was wearing—diamonds! Because every single one of them is made of the same simple element. Element Number Six.”

Light dawned in Todd’s eyes.

“Carbon!” he shouted. “Why, of course! Carbon!”

“Exactly,” I said. “Carbon. And now the last of our troubles are over, because I just finished setting Jessifer to the proper notch a few seconds ago. Now he’s a radium finder once more—”

Then—there it was again! Slops’ frightened face in the visiplate, Slops’ raving voice yammering over the audio.

“Skipper! Skipper, that crazy robot—” The old man’s eyes gleamed brightly.

“Radium! Is he hollering? Has he detected some radium, Slops?”

“If he has,” squalled the galley ghoul, “that dinner I just cooked for you is worth a million bucks! He’s hollering, all right. But he’s down here takin’ a bath in a potful of tapioca! Is tapioca got radium in it?”

The skipper’s outraged scream followed me down the ramp.

“Sparks! Confound you, Sparks, come back here!”

But he hasn’t caught me yet. Jessifer was right. Discretion is the better part of pallor.



“Siblings of the Sun”

“The best laid plans of mice and men,” mourned Robert Burns, “gang aft alee.”

Some scores of years ago, when I was writing for such magazines as *Planet Stories* and *Amazing Stories*, I conceived the notion of writing one story of adventure based on each of Sol’s planets. So sure was I that I had done this that I proposed a book titled as above . . . only to discover to my dismay that I had neglected to honor Neptune!

Thus a segment of a different whole I offer here those tales concerning possible life and adventure on the planets or moons of Jupiter, Mars and Saturn. Elsewhere you may one day find tales set on most of the other siblings, but if you are ever to read a Bond tale based on Neptune you will find it only in the library of the great unwritten, along with Shakespeare’s *Agamemnon* and the verses of Coleridge might have penned save for the visitor from Porlock.

Nelson S. Bond



Shadrach

Once, in Bible times, three men were cast into a fiery furnace—and lived! Now, on far-off, frozen Titania, three space-bitten Shadrachs faced the same awful test of godship.

THE MAN AT THE END OF THE BAR WAS VERY drunk. That was not, in itself, unusual. Xuerl's Cosmobar, dangling like a leech on the drab outskirts of Mars Central, did not cater to a select clientele. It was not noted for its culture or gentility; it was famed from one end of the System to another as a place where a hard-fisted, full-pursed spaceman, newly in from the mines or out from Earth, could get a weapon or a wench, a bottle or a battle, any or all with equal celerity. And at an instant's notice.

But the man at the end of the bar was very drunk. So drunk, indeed, that he seemed neither to notice nor to be concerned about the actions of his comrades. And they, Chip Warren thought as he watched the bleary man pour yet another jigger of green from a malevolently gleaming bottle of *lisk*, were a particularly evil-looking and ill-assorted lot. Even for a dive like this.

"A Venusian," he mused, "a greenie, a runt—and an Earthman. Like bugs in a rug. . . ."

"Trink?" piped a thin, reedy voice at Chip's elbow. "Trink, ssor?"

Chip shook his head in reply to the Martian barman's query. Damned chrysanthemum! he thought. Damned squeaking, upright chrysanthemum! He would never, so long as he lived, get used to



hearing English speech emanating from the curled petals that served as a Redlander's head. Martians tried to look like Earthlings. They braced their soft, pallid bodies in steel uprights, they underwent serious and probably painful operations to give themselves a humanoid appearance, but they still looked—and always would to Chip—like ungainly flowers of madness.

"No," he said. "Not just now, thanks. Later." He returned his gaze to the group at the end of the bar. A new member had joined the quartet. Another Earthman. Warren's eyes became more speculative as the newcomer drew the Jovian aside, queried him briefly, then moved to the drunken man's shoulder.

"Trink?" piped the persistent voice of the barman.

"Blast jets!" said Chip curtly. "I'll order when I get damn good and—*hey!*"

The gasp broke unbidden from his lips. In the din and confusion of Xuerl's Cosmobar it went unnoticed, even as had gone unnoticed by everyone else the momentary byplay he had glimpsed.

As the newcomer slipped his arm about the drunken man's shoulder, the first Earthman, turning suddenly, dropped from his hand to the floor a previously concealed *something*. A silvery, glistening, round *something* that hit the floor—and bounced!

Four figures reacted immediately, violently, eagerly. The Venusian, the Uranian, the Jovian—like four minds with but a single thought they formed a wall of flesh around the drunken one. The other Earthman's hand leaped out greedily to catch the bouncing blob on the rebound. But in vain. The drunk had retrieved the object, shoved it into a pocket.

But Chip Warren knew what the object was. It was a ball of ekalastron!

Ekalastron! Most recently discovered, rarest, and most precious of all metals known to man! A metal so unique that up to the time of its discovery there had been no place for it in man's supposedly "complete" periodic table.

A metal that, defying man's previous deliberations on the habits of metals, supplied man with the most valuable servant he had ever known. A metal so light that a child could carry enough in one hand to coat the entire hull of a space-cruiser—yet so adamant that a gossamer film of it would deflect the impact of a meteorite or the battering crush of a rotor-gun shell! A metal strong enough to grind diamonds to powder—but so resilient that, when molded and properly treated, it would bounce like a rubber ball!

In all the wide universe, hungry mankind had found less than two tons of this vitally precious new metal. An ounce was worth a prince's ransom; so jealously was each gram weighed, guarded and distributed that the U.S.C.—Universal Science Council—could account for every known ounce of it. Yet here, in the noisy bar of Mars' most infamous refuge for scoundrels, a drunken miner toyed with a chunk the size of a billiard ball!

If Chip Warren's attention had previously been attracted by the oddly-assorted quintet, it was riveted now. Fierce curiosity hunched him forward. Abandoning all shame at eavesdropping, he strained eyes and ears upon the group.

It was well that he did so. Otherwise he would not have seen the sober Earthman's gesture to the bartender, the bartender's furtive acquiescence, the tentacular hand opening a colorless phial, pouring its contents into the miner's bottle of *lisk*. There would have been no one to protect the drunken man from the drug that would swiftly have left him at the mercy of his companions.

But Chip was watching. And moving on raw instinct, without a thought for the consequences, he surged forward. His arm brushed the surprised Uranian aside, his hand thrust just in time to sweep the doped drink from the miner's lips. Glass shattered on the floor, singing a shrill song. Chip's challenging voice echoed its brittle crispness.

"Hold course a minute, buckoes!" he ordered. "What in space goes on around here?"

Chip thought afterward that never in his life had he ever looked upon such stark, forbidding coldness as that which, in the next moment, flamed upon him from the eyes of the newly arrived Earthman.

Everything about the man was cold, bitter and bleak as the hostile depths of space. His eyes were glacier-gray, his lips thin and bloodless as hoarfrost; the hand he shoved forward to grip Chip's wrist in steely grasp was like ice.

The coldness of death was in his voice, although he spoke with infinite quietude.

"I might ask the same of you, sailor." The man had raven-black hair save where, from a widow's peak, one single swatch of pure white sprang startlingly to lie like a stream of ice between dark banks. "By what right do you intrude on a private party?"

Chip shook the man's hand from his wrist. His eyes parried with hot defiance the stranger's frigid calm.

"By the right of any man," he growled, "to see fair play! I saw—"

"A moment, sailor!" The man's voice was like a low note struck in warning. "Before you tell what you saw, you might like to know who I am. My name is Blaze Amborg."

"I don't give a portside blast," snarled Chip, "if your name is Lucifer himself. I saw—"

"You haven't been out here long, have you, sailor? Well—that's your misfortune, I fear. Torth!"

He inclined his head gently toward the giant Venusian. The big man rolled forward. His hamlike paws reached for Chip. But fast as he moved, Chip moved faster still; in the split of a second his hand had found his belt. The dull lights of the Cosmobar glinted sallowly on metal that prodded Amborg's middle.

"So that's the way it is, eh?" gritted Chip. "Your bullies do your fighting for you? Well, maybe you're right. I haven't been out here long. But where I come from, men do their own scrapping. Now—tell these scum of yours to keep their distance, or by the Seven Sacred Stars, I'll let ether through you!"

A man could not tell by studying Amborg's features if his lips were white with fear or what. But the ice in his eyes was deeper, more shadowy. And he said, "Back, Torth!"

"That's better!" approved Chip. "And now—come out of it, you!" The drunken man had finally slipped out of the picture. Blissfully unaware of what was going on about him, his head had slumped to the bar. He was asleep, lips loosely agape, breath coming in sodden grunts. Chip grasped the nape of his neck, shook him roughly. "Pull yourself together!" he commanded. "We're getting out of here!"

The man came to with a start, stared at Chip Warren blearily. "W-whuzzup? Whuzzmatter? Don' shake me like that, ole boy. All pals t'gether. All good ole pals. . . ."

His head dropped forward again, and Chip sighed. It was like kicking a pup, he thought, but it had to be done. His rousing slap jarred the drunk to grieved awareness.

"Hey! *Don'* do that! We're pals, ain't we? All—"

"I wouldn't know about that," snorted Chip. "But I do know these other 'pals' of yours are getting ready to dig you for that—that stuff in your pocket."

That did it. The warning drove its way through the miner's stupor. His head jerked up, his eyes widened, and a hand clawed at his pocket.

"*What?* My ekalastron? The filthy thieves—!"

His loud voice carried throughout the room clearly. Too

clearly. For with a sudden fear, Chip could feel a tension tighten through the hard habitues of the bar. Nervous scrapings of feet, the *frou-frou* of suddenly intense voices. "Ekalatron! Eka—"

For a moment, Chip's guard relaxed. He twisted his head to survey a new and potent danger. And as he did so, a sharp cry burst from Amborg's lips. "Raat 'Aran! Torth!"

Chip whirled back to face immediate trouble. Shapes were plunging down upon him. He wheeled, slipped, tumbled to one side even as the scorching burst of a needle gun seared a hissing path past his shoulder. Someone behind screamed a high, thin scream that died in a choked gurgle. . . .

Then all was madness! The magic word "ekalatron" had wakened the riches-lust of the mob; now the presence of death had roused its blood-lust. In the space of a moment's time, a score of guns were drawn and wildly flaming as the throng charged the bar.

Chip only lived in that moment because he lay helplessly asprawl upon the floor. The hobnailed boots of miners kicked and trampled him, thick bodies struggled, cursed and groaned above him. Once as he tried to scramble to his feet his hand slipped nauseatingly in a pool of freshly spilled and steaming blood.

He was aware that somewhere in the howling mob that fought, not knowing why, and fighting died, the glacier-eyed Amborg strained for sight of him. But the tide of conflict, sweeping over and about them, separated them.

There came a reedy cry in the voice of the Martian barman; the lights went out suddenly, and the room was alive and spiteful with the flames of criss-crossing fire-needles. A questing hand found Chip's throat in the darkness, fingers tightened. But in a flash of fire, Chip saw the figure atop him suddenly crumple, steel clattered aimlessly beside him as his assailant choked and died. Thus close to him walked mad, unreasoning Death.

But he was on his feet again, now, and armed! Chip forced his way toward that spot at the bar where last he had glimpsed the drunken miner. No figure stood there, but his feet stumbled against a yielding body. He stooped—then he blinked as the lights suddenly flared on again.

He looked upon a frightful scene of carnage. Where men had fought, a dozen bodies lay upon the floor like broken things; elsewhere about the room a dozen struggling piles of life, human and humanoid, white, coral and green, Earthborn and spawn of a dozen globes, still fought their purposeless battle. And at the far side of the room—

Amborg!

But Amborg had seen him first. Even as he raised his needle-gun, Chip realized the dousing of the lights, the sudden return of them, had been a trick of Amborg's to gain advantage. The other man had the drop on him . . . even now his hand was tightening on the press.

And then, miraculously—

"Hold!" cried a thunderous voice.

"'Stay now thine hind from the sword, yea, loose not thine arrow from the bow—else by My might shall I crush thee to the dust, truly My lightnings shall wither thee with fire!' Thus saith my Lord God which is Jehovah!"

A vast, awed silence fell suddenly upon the room, a paralysis seized all forms and held them motionless. Amborg stayed his finger. All eyes sought the doorway. And there, covering the whole of the Cosmobar with the ugliest but most efficient looking piece of private ordnance Chip had seen in his life, stood a man. A tall, gangling scarecrow garbed in rusty black; a lean-jawed, hawk-eyed man with tumbling locks of silver and blazing eyes.

A whisper arose from men's lips. A whisper at once respectful and—fearful.

"It's Salvation! Salvation Smith!"

For a long, dramatic moment the old man stood there in the doorway; then, satisfied that all motion had stopped, he stepped forward into the room. Chip knew, now, who—and what—he was. "Salvation" Smith, sin-driving missionary of the Wastelands, was a legendary, almost fabulous, figure of the Martian scene.

A devoutly religious man with the heart and soul of a pioneer, he had taken upon himself the mission of carrying to the savage outland tribes the story of the God he worshipped. That this God was Him of the Old Testament, a God of wrath and vengeance, fire and flame, was evidenced by those methods Salvation sometimes employed to make his message acceptable to uncivilized beasts. In addition to being the most pious man on Mars, Salvation was also reputed to be the best shot!

Earth's softhanded ecclesiastics did not altogether approve of their wayward missionary's reputation, but had to concede that he, working unaided and alone, had done more to bring the Light to Mars than the rest of their emissaries as a group.

Thus Salvation Smith, who stared now at the corpses on the floor and muttered beneath his breath a prayer so hot and violent as to be almost blasphemous.

There came a shrill bleat, and Xuerl, proprietor of the infamous Cosmobar, minced across the floor, grotesque in the rigid habiliments that lent him a humanold shape.

"Sssalvation," he pleaded, "Thisss wasss none of my doing, sssir! I have kept the peace, as I promissed—"

"Silence!" roared the old man, and frowned. "Your foul den is a stench in the nostrils of Heaven. I am tiring swiftly of your iniquitous ways, Xuerl! One day I—shall—who started this, anyway?" he demanded.

"Thisss man!" Xuerl pointed a quavering tentacle at Chip. Salvation gazed at the young man sternly.

"You are new around here. What is your name?"

"Chip Warren. I'm just out from Earth a week or so ago. Freelance prospector. But—but I didn't start this, sir. I merely interfered when that man and his thugs tried to steal a ball of ekalastron from this dead miner—"

Chip paused suddenly, staring at the drunken miner.

"But he's still alive! I thought—"

Salvation was at his side in an instant. They both kneeled beside the miner, whose eyes had flickered open. He was no longer influenced by drink. His eyes were clear with prevision of a longer flight than he had ever known. For a moment he struggled for breath. There was recognition in his feeble tones.

"S-salvation—"

"Peace, my son. We will take you to a hospital."

"N-never mind that, Padre. It's too late. But the ekalastron—"

"You stole it, my son? You wish to confess?"

"N-no, Padre! Not stolen. I found it. A mine—" His breath was coming in tiny, tortured gasps; he spoke more swiftly as if aware that he must tell his secret ere silence claim him. "Danger . . . on Titania! The caves . . . natives . . . and the furnace of flame . . . beware!"

"But *he* survived!" Chip burst in. "He got some and returned. Ask him how, Padre!"

The miner's head moved slightly as if to signify he understood the query, but even as his lips moved to frame an answer, a swift, cold shadow frosted his eyes with glaze. A moment later his breath stopped. Then it shuddered back as with a violent effort the dying man dragged himself back from death itself. A convulsion shook him. He cried weakly the single word:

"*Shadrach!*"

Then a blood-specked spume gushed from his lips and he lay still. "May the Lord have mercy on his soul!" begged Salvation

Smith. He pushed Chip gently away, fumbled at the dead man's clothing, arranging it more neatly, then rose.

"He is gone," he told the spellbound assembly. "He is gone, bearing with him to the world beyond the secret for which you jackals strove. Thus be it, O Lord God of Hosts!"

But one man did not accept this as final. That man was Blaze Amborg who, bolstered now by his hard-bitten group of outlaws, strode forward belligerently.

"Not so fast, psalm-singer! He and I were partners. Anything he had belongs to *me* now!" He bent over and with a jerk disarranged the clothing Salvation had smoothed. "And by the Comet, I'm going to have it—" His hands moved with deft assurance, then with tense, hardening suspicion. "It's gone!" He wheeled to face Chip. "You stole it! You—"

But the old missionary barred his rush with a steel forearm. "Slowly, my friend! What is gone?"

"The ball of ekalastron! It's worth a fortune, and it's mine! This snoopy young thief—"

Salvation turned to Chip sternly. "Well, young man—is this true? Did you steal it? If so—"

"I didn't. I swear I didn't!"

"He was bending over Jenkins," Amborg raged, "when the lights went on. He's got it! Let me at him!"

"There has been sufficient violence!" snapped Salvation Smith. He turned to Chip. "Young man, I order you to let your accuser search you. If you are truly innocent, you will not demur. If you refuse—" He shifted his rifle from one horny palm to another significantly. "Justice shall prevail!"

"Very well!" said Chip. He submitted himself to Amborg's triumphant search. His flesh ran cold at the feel of the man's icy fingers, and a dull resentment suffused him—but he got his reward in the look of bafflement that grew on Amborg's face as it became clear that the missing sphere was not on his person. "Are you satisfied now?" he demanded.

Amborg's normally pale face was whiter still with impotent fury; his eyes flamed with hatred. "It's not *on* you," he admitted. "But I know you took it. You've hidden it somewhere. I'm not through with you yet, sailor! I'll have that metal or—"

"There will be no 'or'!" proclaimed Salvation Smith stridently. "The lad has passed the test and proven himself guiltless; the case is closed. He will walk from this place unharmed—in my company! 'The true man shall suffer no hurt, neither shall the righteous fail.' Come, my son!"

And he lifted his gun. Blaze Amborg's lips thinned to a hard, white line. But he made no reckless move as the two men stalked silently from the room.

II

The Martian night was clear and cold. Its thin air was sweetly welcome to Chip's nostrils. When they gained the street outside, Salvation spoke to him suddenly. "Where is your ship, my son?"

"Ship, sir?" queried Warren. "But why—?"

"Don't waste time!" snapped the old man. "We're in grave danger. Blaze Amborg is a man of violence. In a few minutes he'll figure out what happened to the ekalastron and be out looking for us."

Chip stared at him. "The ekalastron? But what *did* happen to it? It disappeared—"

"Into," grunted Salvation, "my pocket! While I was arranging Jenkins' clothing. 'He who taketh in the cause of righteousness hath done the will of the Lord!' Amborg is an evil, wilful man. He would have used the ekalastron for his own wicked purposes. In our hands, all mankind shall profit of its beneficence. But, come! Where?"

"C-churchill Field," stammered Chip. "Dock 31, Bin A. T—this way, Padre."

They moved at quickened stride through the darkened streets. As they neared the cradles wherein lay the vessels of a thousand diverse ports, Salvation questioned Chip still further.

"What type of ship is it, lad?"

"Not a very new one, sir. A Challenger 7-jet, four berth explorer. But in good shape. My friend and I managed to get it cheap, reconditioned it—"

"Then you have a companion?"

"Yes, Padre. Syd Palmer. He's waiting aboard. We had planned to lift gravs tomorrow for a prospecting tour of the planetoids. I visited the Cosmobar because I thought I might run into some old space-dodger who would give me a tip on a lode-rock—"

"And you ran into," said the missionary, "something which may turn out to be the greatest discovery ever made by man. Murder . . . thievery . . . wealth . . . is this the ship?"

They had stopped before one of the smaller cradles. Chip pressed a signal button, a buzzer responded, there came from within the familiar wheeze of an airlock generator.

"This is it, sir. Please step in. 'Lo, Syd. This is Doctor—Mister—"

"Call me 'Salvation'," said the old man. "I'm used to it. Palmer, I take it you're the chief engineer of this jalopy?"

Syd Palmer was short and chubby; his hair was a tow colored bristle that stood up like a cock's-comb when he was excited or annoyed. It stood up now, and his pale blue eyes danced with tiny, indignant sparks.

"I'm the engineer of this *ship*!"

"Call it what you will," grunted Salvation. "Is it fast?"

Palmer grinned. "Puh-lenty! I've hepped the hypos to super-max. The *Chickadee* can outrun anything its size in space, and a lot of bigger ones, besides!"

"Good! And have you got clearance papers?"

"Why, yes, but—"

"Excellent: 'Verily, He taketh care of His own nor faileth them in time of need.'" Salvation nodded to Warren. "We'll lift gravs," he said, "immediately!"

Palmer stared at him, then at his companion.

"What is this, Chip? Old boy off his jets?"

"Far from it," said Chip seriously. "Can't explain everything now, Syd; time's too short. But you like a good, old-fashioned fight, don't you?"

"Fight? Sa-a-ay, now—"

"Then warm the hypos," ordered Chip, "while I plot a course. We're lifting gravs immediately—for Titania."

During the long days that followed, there was time to spare in which to clarify the situation to Syd. When he heard of Chip's adventure at the Cosmobar, his pale eyes gleamed and fists less chubby than they appeared tightened at his sides. "Wish I'd been there—" he muttered. Salvation glared at him and snorted, "'Verily they are fools who do not rejoice that they have escaped woe!'"

And when Chip showed him the ball of ekalastron—

"Glory be!" exclaimed Syd. "There's enough to dip a whole battle unit in that one ball! What are we going to Titania for? Why not fly this to Earth immediately and let the Council know—"

"Because Amborg knows," replied Chip grimly, "that this came from Titania. He was nearby when Jenkins said so in his dying breath. That was probably the secret Amborg's thugs had been trying to probe from the miner all night. I have a hunch that Amborg is out there somewhere right now!"

He nodded toward the quartzite viewpane. Outside lay space—the long, dreary reaches of space between Mars and Uranus. But it didn't look like space. Not like space as navigators a short ten

years ago had known it, an eternal pall of blackness spangled with the livid dots of a myriad stars.

This was a blotched, striped, crazy-quilt of color. Crimson, ochre, emerald—all the hues of the rainbow merged into a faery, magic loveliness. This was space as seen when Man traveled at the terrific speed attainable only through the use of the recently developed V-I unit, velocity intensifier, invented by that mad genius of the spaceways, Lancelot Biggs of the lugger, *Saturn*.

Five years ago, in the year 2210, the fastest craft in the ether had had a top speed of approximately 200,000 miles per hour. Now almost every ship was equipped with the V-I adapter that gave it a flight-potential limited only by the critical velocity of light. Where once it would have required almost ten months to reach Titania, second satellite of far Uranus, the trio could now expect to gain their destination, traveling at a speed of more than 650,000,000 mph, in something less than half that many *days*!

"I have a hunch," repeated Chip, "that Amborg and his crew are somewhere out there right now, speeding, as we are, to Titania. Of course we can't tell. We're not equipped with a magnotector, and we couldn't see them unless by sheer chance they should approach within our visibility parallax.

"But when we get to Titania and slow down, we must go on the alert. Salvation has told me about Amborg. He's a hard, brilliant man with a dangerously criminal mind. Let him find Jenkins' ore-deposit and the Federation of Planets would pay through the nose for his discovery. Jenkins said there was a whole mine of ekalastron. With that at his disposal, Amborg could make himself a robber baron. An Emperor of the outlaw world."

"Which is why," Salvation offered gravely, "we must get there before he does. Lay claim to the deposit, somehow secure its safety against the arrival of I.P.S. troops. Can we but find the mine, soldiers will come in jigtime from New Oslo on Uranus. But—"

Syd nodded.

"I see. But we couldn't walk into the garrison and hand them a line about a "mine" of ekalastron. They'd shove us into the nearest looney-bin. And I wouldn't blame them a bit. If I didn't know Chip Warren like I know my own lovely pan—but suppose we meet Amborg?"

"The Lord," said Salvation, "'is my strength and my salvation. In His hands do I place my guidance.'" His lean hands flexed powerfully. "We destroy them," he said gently, "like the rats they are . . ."

Thus four days sped by in plan and conjecture. And on the fifth

day Syd Palmer cut the velocity-intensifiers to normal, and a scant thousand miles beneath them, so accurate had been Chip's astrogation, gleamed the silvery mote which was Titania, second child of the mother planet, Uranus.

"Well done, my son!" approved Salvation. "The best landcast I've ever seen!"

Palmer was less exuberant. He stared at Titania, scratched his yellow crest morbidly.

"A damn snowball!" he mourned. "A damned snowball, eight hundred miles in diameter! Sweet crimes of Beelzebub, Chip, how do you ever expect to find a pinpoint of a mine on that huge hunk of ice? It will take us ages!"

"We'll cruise at low elevation," said Chip, "until we see something. There must be a dark spot showing against that sheen of white somewhere. Jenkins spoke of caverns and natives and flame. We have plenty of supplies—*look out!*"

He leaped even as he shouted. Leaped to the panels and jammed the full strength of his six foot plus frame to a deflecting lever. The control room of the *Chickadee* whirled giddily as the little ship spun into a crazy spiral; Palmer yelped, skidding helplessly across the floor. Salvation let loose a roar and clung ardently to a stanchion, his silvery locks whipping straight out from his head with the force of the drive.

Chip threw himself into the bucket-shaped pilot's-chair, gained possession of the controls. An instant later, the *Chickadee* was tossing through the maddest gyrations Chip could devise. Fore, loft and jet, with hypos throbbing, the little craft was blasting, shaking, quivering like a leaf in a cyclone.

And above the tumult of racing hypos came the sound of Syd's voice: "What is it, Chip? Amborg?"

Chip nodded tightly, his hands gripping the control levers, his eyes glued to the perilens through which he saw the enemy craft. A larger ship, with a red fang darting from its prow, slashing viciously at the bobbing *Chickadee*. "It's Blaze Amborg, all right! And he means business! He's got an Ingermann ray-rotor on that crate of his; he's trying to burn us clean out of the ether!"

Chip Warren and Syd Palmer were the co-owners of the *Chickadee*; it was Chip whose alertness had saved them in that first, terrifying moment, Chip it was who still held the controls. But it was Salvation Smith who usurped the mastership during the crisis.

"Hell's flaming damnation!" he cried, and there rang in his voice a rage above weak need of profanity. "Lend now Thy ser-

vant strength, O Lord, to smite these sons of Hurkan!" He whirled on Palmer, snarling. "Break out bulgers for us in case they should pierce the hull! Chip, son, do the controls answer well? Good! Keep dodging. Swing aft; the beam can't nip you there! You've armament aboard this heap?"

Syd, tugging three spacesuits from the store-closet, puffed over his shoulder, "Only a low-cycle heat-gun. There! Under that tarp. Press the green stud to clear the nose from the hull-plates. It's retractable—"

"You're telling me," bellowed Salvation, "how to rig a cannon? I was teathed on a lanyard, praise be to Jehovah!" He had the tarpaulin off in a jiffy, the foreirons open, and shot an experimental burst from the small weapon. He smiled. "Good! But you've got to get closer to him, Chip; this thing is only effective at short range."

Chip said dubiously, "I don't know, Padre. Perhaps we should cut and run for it. If that beam hits us—"

"Are we mice," bellowed Salvation, "or men? You've got to get closer! The Lord is our right hand. 'Surely the evil shall fail, yea, the way of the transgressor shall perish!' " He loosed another blast from the small gun, breathed a sigh of satisfaction. "Aaah! that's better! Closer!"

"You're the skipper!" decided Chip suddenly. A jab of the finger, the sternjets crackled and the *Chickadee* cut suddenly to starboard, swinging straight toward the craft of Blaze Amborg.

So unexpected was the move that it caught the enemy gunner napping. For an instant he had a clear target before him. But he had not been expecting such luck, and before he could center his sights on the *Chickadee*, the smaller vessel was streaking down upon and over his own.

And Salvation Smith's voice shouted triumph through the room. "'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord!' he intoned, "'I shall repay!'" His hand jerked the release-stud.

And as though the metal skin of the enemy boat were tinfoil held above a flame, there appeared suddenly upon its hull a leprous spot of black, from the curling edges of which silvery alloy sloughed off in rolling, sluggish waves. From within the ship small motes poured forth, sucked out by the frigid vacuum of space to explode and die frightfully; sore, raw, pressured clots of matter that had been men. The other ship reeled for a moment like a stricken hart, then crumpled upon itself, a wildly spinning boomerang of death.

"You got 'em!" squealed Syd Palmer from his vantage spot at

the perilens. "Got 'em all, Padre! No—there goes a life-skiff from the wreck!" His voice rose in sharp fear. "*Omigod!* Swing out, Chip! Swing—"

But Chip had seen the new danger as quickly as his comrade. Here was peril beyond Amborg's fondest devising. As the stricken ship, folding upon itself, spun aimlessly in space, its forejet wheeled like a flaming spiral—and from the prow still flamed the withering, crimson ray now untended by living hands!

Like a gigantic scythe it flailed the ether, swinging a huge curve directly toward the *Chickadee*. Vainly Chip jammed the studs before him, striving to escape above, below or beyond that sword of doom.

There came the ear-splitting crash of impact, metal screamed thin agony, rending itself to shreds somewhere aft; the *Chickadee* shuddered like a pole-felled steer under its mortal wound.

Instinct shot Chip's hands to the lock-stud which sealed the control chamber airtight from the rest of the ship; that action alone spared them for a few minutes. But each of them knew the ship was doomed to crash. Syd croaked, "Here! The bulgers! Get in them—*quick!*"

Split seconds later, they were three grotesque figures huddled before the control board, staring through quartzite globular headpanes at Chip's last, frenzied efforts to break the fall of the *Chickadee*. The studs beneath his fingers were unresponsive as the inarticulate phalanges of a broken limb. In vain and desperately he struggled to gain a modicum of control over the falling craft, now firmly gripped by Titania's gravitational field. They had fallen into the high atmosphere of the little globe, now; thin winds howled and bansheed about their sharded hull, and the walls of the room began to heat.

The aft jets were dead, the anti-gravs broken, helpless. There remained but one possible way in which to keep them from being crushed to bits. A prow landing, braked by the fore jets. It was dangerous, but—

"There!" cried Syd. "Look there, Chip! Below us!"

Chip risked a brief glance, saw that the smooth and icy surface of Titania was broken by a long, ragged swatch of black. Ironical laughter curled the corners of his tight-set lips. What a quirk of fate that here, with death but a hair's-breadth removed, they should unwittingly find that for which under happier circumstances they might have sought endlessly and in vain. The promised spot of habitation on the bleak little moon of Uranus.

"I'm fore-jetting!" he crisped. "Stand by for—a fadeout!"

Salvation's hand was on his shoulder, reassuringly, somehow warm despite its casement of rubberoid fabric. "Be of strong heart, my son," he said simply, "'He who watcheth the fall of the smallest sparrow, He shall not fail His own in their hour of need.'"

Then Chip pressed the necessary, the only remaining responsive keys. And the control room trembled like a hurt thing, seemed to stop stock-still in space, shake itself for a moment—then plunge on. Forejets flamed blast upon roaring blast. Chip felt the gravitational force seem to lessen as the flares beat stubbornly against the adamant breast of the globe below. Drop . . . stagger . . . drop again . . . the shocking concussion of brakes . . . then a swift, dizzy, headlong fall. . . .

Wild winds howled, and the din of metals tortured beyond endurance slashed at Chip's eardrums. He was aware of the last cry of Syd Palmer, his life-long friend. "Luck, Chip, old pal—!" And the remembered ghost of Salvation's promise. "He shall not fail His own—"

Then a horrendous crash jarred his head back on the seat. A smashing veil of crimson settled before his eyes . . . then there was darkness. And silence.

He felt some mad conceit that this was death . . . that the restless fingers of the gray unalive plucked at his arm, bidding him rise and stir forward toward he knew not what.

Then suddenly he was awake, alive, and conscious—and it was not death, but life; fingers *did* tug at him, but they were the fingers of—

"'Ranies!" cried Chip. "Hands off, you! Or—"

The green complexioned native growled some guttural comment, moved closer rather than away, and pinioned Chip's arms to his sides. Chip saw, now, that the *Chickadee*, though battered and broken beyond hope of repair, had miraculously grounded without destroying them all. For Syd was stirring, and Salvation, too, but each of them was surrounded by green natives, as was Chip. These creatures, the nearest approach to Man's physiology that had ever been found in the System, were tall and rugged, masterfully built. They were equipped with native lariats or bolas; these they whipped cuttingly about their captives.

Chip strained lashed fingers toward the heat-pistol in his belt. But Salvation, seeing his motion, stopped him.

"No, lad! Relax! Don't make a hostile move!"

Chip growled, "No damned greenie is going to make a trussed duck out of me, If I can reach this gun—"

"If you value your life," said Salvation, "and your welfare,

keep your hands quiet and your wits active! These creatures aren't Uranians. They're Titanians. An offspring of the parent race, but as savage and untamed as beasts."

"I don't know what they plan to do with us. I have heard they are a strange, mystical race; their tribal rites and taboos are many and—dangerous! Our only chance is to be quiet, try to reason with them, convince them we are not foes but friends—"

All three were securely tied, now, save for their legs. The tallest Titanian, evidently the group chieftain, grunted a word of command. Strong arms prodded Chip and his fellows forward, out of the broken *Chickadee*, into the bleak landscape of Titania.

They had crashed in the dark spot Chip had viewed from above. They discovered, now, that this spot was dark because—incredibly—here the thick, icy blanket had been stripped away to discover the raw and rocky core of the Uranian moon.

Black rocks thrust jagged spires skyward, mountains of stone girdled this one clear space on the whole of Titania; greater wonder still, gnarled and stunted trees, lichens of hardiest verdure, eked a precarious existence from the grudging soil.

And here the natives had—a village. One coarser, cruder, than the village of the meanest of Earth's savages, but a village nonetheless. Slab dwellings dabbed with thick black clay, a central structure, larger than the rest, something that looked like a market—or community gathering-spot.

Chip's wonderment had made him impervious at first to such trivia as personal comfort and discomfort. He found now, though, that he was cold. By dint of much effort, he managed to squirm a hand to his belt-studs, operate the tiny needle that increased the warmth of his spacesuit.

Almost immediately there came a howl from the green native maintaining a vigilant grip on Chip's arm; the fellow leaped away, bellowing angry, guttural speech at his leader.

And Salvation spun to Chip swiftly.

"Chip—turn down that heat, boy!"

"B—but—" stammered Chip.

"Quickly!"

Chip obeyed. It was well he did so, for the leader was moving toward him menacingly. With a cautious finger he touched Chip's suit. Then, apparently mollified to discover it satisfactorily cold, he snarled a word or two and the little party moved on.

Chip stared at the old missionary.

"But, why?" he demanded. "What did I do wrong? I don't get it. I was freezing, and—"

"Then you've got to freeze," said Salvation Smith, "and like it."

Until we can escape from these creatures. Do you have any idea how cold it is here on Titania, my boy?"

Chip said, "Why, plenty cold, I suppose—"

"About minus 380° Fahrenheit!" said Smith. "That's all. Uranians and Titanians may *look* like Earthmen, lad, but they're built entirely different. They are not children of the Sun, as we are. Their bodies are so constituted as to be able to stand extremes of frigidity that would quick-freeze us like salmon. Sluggish basal metabolism, dermal, rather than pneumonic respiration—these enable them to endure what to us appear the impossible living conditions of a world on which mercury and gallium are adamant solids, liquid hydrogen forms seas, and the snow is carbon dioxide.

"When you turned on the heating unit of your bulger you subjected that native's hand to what was to him a burning, unendurable heat!"

Chip nodded.

"I see. That makes sense. But—but there must be some warmth around here? A cleared patch—"

"I haven't yet decided whether this patch was cleared by heat or labor," said Salvation. "If we can make them believe we are friends, I may learn. I can sling their talk a little. It's not unlike the Uranian language. But—"

He stopped, and his voice rose to a shout. "Behold! Thou hast delivered mine enemy into mine hands, O Lord; Thou hast brought the wicked even unto judgment!"

And Chip, following his gaze, saw a second party of Titanians approaching the central gathering place from the opposite direction. These natives held captive, even as he and Salvation and Syd were held, an ill-assorted foursome in spacemen's bulgers. A giant Venusian, a greenie, a dwarfed Jovian and an Earthman!

"Amborg!" yelled Chip. "Blaze Amborg and his crew! They got away on that life-skiff, but they were caught when they landed! Padre—"

It had not occurred to him that the arms of Amborg and his men would not be, like their own, lashed securely. Thus it came as a heart-stopping shock to hear Amborg's cry ring in their ears, a sharp cry of command—then suddenly there flamed from the sidearms of the other captive group the withering blasts of heat-guns!

III

Chip Warren had bitterly resented the close guard with which the Titanians had surrounded him and his comrades; he had reason, now, to be grateful for that very protection. Otherwise his

dreams of space adventure would have ended suddenly and terribly in that moment.

As it was, the foremost wall of Titanians took the brunt of Amborg's vicious attack. They screamed as pencils of crimson scorched the life from their unprotected bodies, screamed and died horribly, falling in blackened piles that whimpered futilely for an instant and were still.

Chip had never known a moment of such dreadful impotence as this. Arms lashed to his sides, his own weapon as securely removed from his grasp as if it no longer existed, there was nothing he could do but attempt to evade the flame of the lethal guns.

With a choking cry to his mates, he threw himself forward; his knees struck rocky ground, grit slashed his unprotected headpane as he fell, and for an instant he feared the impact might shatter the quartzite, exposing him to the deadly, ammoniac atmosphere of Uranus' second moon.

Then he was entrenched behind the still-smouldering bodies of the slain Titanians, watching the speed of their fellows' reprisal.

And it was speedy. Salvation had spoke truly when he said these creatures were savage and untamed as beasts. Reckless of their own lives, green-casted features snarling, they swooped down on the treacherous quartet. In the split of a second they had seized them, bound them, removed their weapons.

But Chip and his companions suffered the same fate as their adversaries. The Titanians stripped them of their sidearms, as they had taken those of Amborg's men. Ungentle hands herded them into one of the nearby hovels, and there, as two guards held the single doorway, they were deserted.

Salvation groaned his rage and discomfiture.

"A judgment on that beast in man's flesh!" he proclaimed. "He has destroyed us all! Had I been given an opportunity to talk with their chief, quietly, peaceably, this matter might have been settled with no harm done to anyone. But as it is—" He shook his head.

Syd said, "What do you think they'll do next?"

"Whatever it is," said Chip tightly, "I've got an idea it isn't going to be pleasant. They're gathering; hear their footsteps and voices? And there's something like the beat of a tom-tom—" He stared at Salvation speculatively. "Padre—torture?"

Salvation stroked his long, lean jaw. "I hope not, my son. But—I don't know. They are savages, And I have heard they place much faith in rites and ceremonies. But we will learn soon. Meanwhile, keep faith with Him who watches us all."

They learned sooner than they dared expect. Whatever else might lay in store for them, they were at least spared the agony of waiting. The Titanian preparations took but little time. Within scant hours after their incarceration, the three Earthmen were once again dragged from their prison to meet their judgment and their fate.

That some form of ritual was in progress was immediately apparent. From hillside, rock, cranny and hovel had come the Titanians; there were more of them than Chip would have believed could subsist in this hostile environment. A solid phalanx of them walled the avenue up which they were led. As they walked, the Titanians chanted a slow and ominous threnody. There was a dirgelike quality to the chant; despite the surface courage with which Chip bolstered himself he felt the chill of nervous apprehension upon him. Palmer must have felt the same way. He edged closer to Chip, spoke from the corner of his mouth in a tone that belied the forced gaiety of his words.

"Swell end to our trip, pal. *Piece de resistance* for a gang of green choristers!"

Salvation overheard him. "We have not yet come to the end of our journey," he said. "The line stretches up the side of yonder hill. To those caves." He lifted his voice sonorously, drawing curious stares from the green-skinned Titanian guards. "I shall lift up mine eyes unto the hills," he cried, "whence cometh my strength and my salvation—"

"Caves!" Sudden memory flashed back upon Chip Warren. "Jenkins said something about caves, Padre, remember? Caves and flame—"

"There's Amborg," interrupted Syd. His plump face was tightly pale behind his globular mask. "I don't care so much about checking out," he said, "but I wish I could get my hands on that rat just for a minute before—"

His words dwindled into silence. It was, Chip believed, an impressed silence. For they had reached the foot of the hill, now, and were climbing between two chanting rows of natives toward a huge, ornate, altarlike structure placed before the largest of the cave-mouths.

The dirge rose and soared, filling their ears with numbing fear; they moved upward inexorably, monotonously, almost mechanically. And finally they stood before the high altar.

Chip saw, then, what he would never have credited if it had been told him by another; what he could not have believed had he

not seen it with his own eyes. He saw into the cave-mouth—and what he viewed there was so incredible that it brought a gasp unbidden to his lips.

This cave, deepset in the mouths of icy Titania—this cave, which by all laws of nature, of logic and reason, should be a dank, forbidding gateway to frightful cold—was bright-gleaming with orange, crimson, ochre tongues of flame! Within it, high-rising to the very lofted vaults, roared a staggering, tremendous holocaust of fire!

And beyond the altar was a precipice overlooking a sunken vale. This vale, like the interior of the cave, was shimmering like the plains of Abaddon with coruscating fingers, sheets, spires of red.

He was aware that he had gasped, for he detected a similar gasp from Syd, and he heard Salvation Smith say a single, incredulous word. "Sheol!" Then the chieftain, or high priest—Chip did not know which—spoke from the altar. Shortly he spoke, but with strident emphasis, jabbing his fingers at the two groups of captives in turn.

"What is he saying?" demanded Chip.

Salvation interpreted hastily. "We have violated their land. We have been brought to the Place of Destruction to meet judgment for our crime. The test of fire will prove our guilt—" Then he raised his voice, spoke to the Titanian ruler.

The outland ruler heard him through, then answered. Salvation turned to Chip and Syd. "I told him," he explained, "that we were friends, come in amity. That we intended them no harm or offense—"

"And what did he say?"

"He said," relayed Salvation grudgingly, "that they were forced to distrust us because our 'companions' were men of sin and violence—"

"Companions!" interjected Syd angrily.

"—and he said, also, that he realized we might be gods. He says there are two types of white creatures, those who are mortals and evil, and those who are Masters of Fire. We must be tested to see which we are."

"Two types?" cried Chip. "Masters of Fire? Padre, what does he mean?"

Salvation shrugged helplessly. "I don't know. But wait—he is talking again."

This time the green chieftain's speech was longer, more dra-

matic. He postured, gestured; once he strode to the edge of his raised platform and pointed majestically down into the chasm below. Then, concluding his words with a tone of finality, he folded his arms across his chest.

Chip noticed that a few rods away Amborg's Uranian companion was interpreting his decision to Blaze. Salvation performed the same function.

"He says," explained Salvation, "we must walk into this cave of fearful flame. It leads through burning corridors to the valley below. In that valley is the life-skiff which brought Amborg and his men here.

"If we are good men, gods, and guiltless, the flame will not destroy us. There was one not long ago who walked unscathed through the fires, he says. That man was surely a god."

"Jenkins!" broke in Chip. "It must have been—"

Salvation nodded. "That is what I thought, too, my son. But—but how? How could Jenkins survive the flames?" And he stared sombrely, questioningly, at the sheet of ruddy fire filling the cave from base to arch. He shook himself. "Well—that is a problem we must solve, and soon. For the ceremony has begun. *Amborg!*" he cried.

The dark man turned. Chip saw that his face was set in granite lines. Nearest to the cavern mouth, his men were being prodded toward the awful test they must endure.

Even in this critical moment, Salvation was the man of god. "Amborg," he said, "you have been ever an evil man, living and thinking the thoughts of Satan. But there is yet time for you to repent and confess your sins. As a fellow man, I loathe and despise you. But as His emissary, I offer you even in this hour of trial the peace that surpasseth all human understanding—"

Amborg laughed at him. His voice crackled harshly, metallically, in the audiophones of Chip's space-helmet.

"Save that stuff for the suckers, old man. You and your pals are just worried because we get first chance to go down into the valley. Well—you'd better worry! There's a rotor-gun mounted in that life-skiff. If we hadn't all been jarred cold when we landed, we'd have given these greenies a sweet greeting. We're going to lift the ship out of that ditch and bring it back over here. Save your prayers; you'll need them when we come over!"

Salvation reminded him stonily, "The flames—"

"Flames be damned! Superstitious poppycock! Spacesuits will protect us from heat or cold alike. Well—come on!"

He gestured his mates to him. The wailing chant of the Titan-

ian natives increased in tone and volume as the four outlaws left their guards and boldly strode the last few rods up the hill, past the dais—and into the roaring hell-mouth of the cave!

And as they entered, Chip Warren knew a swift sinking of heart. His apprehensions had been unfounded, Amborg's claim that the lethal power of the flame was "superstitious poppycock" was true. The spacesuits *were* adequate protection, and in short moments, Amborg would be soaring back across the plateau, the jets of his rotor-gun spewing death and destruction upon them all. . . .

Then, "My God!" gasped Syd Palmer, his voice awed.

Chip looked, and shuddered to see, the last judgment of Blaze Amborg and his men. A scant dozen yards they strode into the cavern. Vast spirals of fire played about them, but they did not falter. Their suits, ingeniously woven of metal, rubber, asbesto-quartz, defied the combustive powers of fire. But despite this—one of the figures staggered. The stunted Jovian was first to succumb. He had just pitched forward to his face when the second figure reeled. Raat 'Aran, the Uranian. He reeled and clutched at the tall Venusian, Torth—but the Venusian, too, had dropped to his knees; his hands clawed frenziedly at his breast.

Then the mysterious death struck Amborg. His voice rang out in a piercing scream; Chip saw him stare wildly at the three now-motionless bodies of his comrades, whirl, race back toward the safety of the hillside.

But he never reached it. He had taken no more than a dozen strides when he fell. A moment later his incoherent cries babbled sickening delirium into his watchers' earphones. . . .

Then all was still, save for the inexorable chanting of the natives. And the grave, judicial voice of the Titanian on the altar.

"They have been tested in the flame," interpreted Salvation Smith soberly, "and found guilty. Now it is our turn. . . ."

Chip Warren was not a religious man. He lived by a simple code: do good and keep your sidearms primed. But now there faced him the inevitable finality of death; he felt an urge to meet that last, great mystery in comfort. He turned to his friends gravely.

"Now," he said, "it is our turn. So I guess this is goodbye, Syd. And Padre—it might help if you could say a few words for us . . . just something. . . ."

"So be it, my son!" said Salvation, understandingly. He lifted his head; his fine old eyes sought the murky gray skies of Titania,

so different from the sweet blue Earthly skies for which all spacefarers' hearts yearned when their journey's end was reached.

"If this be the way," he said quietly, "thy servants must depart, then so be it, O Lord. Yet even now in extremis we do not forget Thee and Thy might. We remember even yet—" He looked at the flaming cave-mouth toward which they must in a moment walk. "Even yet we remember a fellowship like ours who met and defied the dread embrace of fire."

"'And in those days,' he said, "'there were three children of Israel which the king Nebuchadnezzar ordered to be cast without raiment into the fiery furnace. And their names were Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—'"

"*Shadrach!*" cried Chip. There was no intentional irreverence in his interruption. Understanding had burst upon him so suddenly that the words hurtled from his lips.

"Peace, my son!" counseled the old man. "Let not your heart be troubled—"

"It's not! We're all right, Padre! If my hunch is right—and it must be! Look, they are bidding us walk into the caves. We haven't a moment to spare. Hurry, *get off your spacesuits!*"

There was biting cold upon Chip Warren's limbs and body as he cast the limp shell of his bulger behind him. But as he neared the cavern's mouth, the cold grew less intense. Less intense! That in itself was final, convincing proof he had been right! He was barely two yards from the writhing gouts of flame now. Were that the true fire it *appeared* to be, its searing blasts would already be parching his skin to black flakes—

But it was not! It was merely—pleasantly warm!

"I was right!" he cried exultantly. "Syd . . . Padre! Come on in!" His voice was almost hysterical with relief as he stepped gingerly over the prostrate bodies of those who had gone into the fiery furnace garbed in suits of metallic substance. "Come on in—the fire's fine!"

And together the three new Children of Israel walked unharmed into the fiery furnace of Titania. . . .

The corridors led, as the Titanian chieftain said, downward, winding, through the hill to the vale below, where rested Amborg's navigable life-skiff. The small cruiser in which they were to fly to neighboring Uranus, there find aid and eager ears into which to pour their story.

And it did not surprise Chip Warren in the least to discover, about halfway down the flickering tunnel, a ledge of brightly

gleaming ore that was resilient to the touch but broke the keen edge of the knife with which Chip attempted to scratch it.

"Ekalastron!" he cried, "See—a whole mountain of it! Not just a mine; a mountain! Enough to fill Man's needs for centuries!"

Syd's eyes, behind the quartzite globe, were big as saucers. He gulped, C-chip—are you sure we're alive? Do you think maybe we died back there in the first cave, maybe? And this is all some wild illusion—?"

"It is not illusion," proclaimed Salvation serenely. "I understand, now, what Chip divined in time to save us from a dreadful fate." And he looked at the young man affectionately. "Radiation was what killed the others, my boy?"

Chip nodded. "Must have been, Padre. The 'flames' were not true flames at all. Not as we Earthlings, children of a warm Sun, masters of combustive fire, understand flame.

"Different elements have different combustive temperatures. On bitter-cold Uranus and Titania, the kindling point of certain rare gases is necessarily in ratio to the outer cold. The kindling point of the gases in this tunnel is a temperature which—though fiery-hot and deadly to the Titanians—is only pleasantly *warm* to us!"

"So Amborg," continued Syd, "walked into the flaming tunnel wearing a spacesuit—"

"A *metallic* space-suit," reminded Chip, "which was a transmitter for certain lethal radiations inherent to this 'cold heat.' Blaze Amborg did not die of flame. He died of—electrocution."

Then a strange thought struck him and he turned suddenly to Salvation Smith. "Padre—?"

"Yes, my son?"

"The story you started to tell. The one that gave me my inspiration. About Shadrach. I wonder if some time long ago in the past, that legend may not have sprung from an adventure such as ours?"

Salvation smiled and shook his head.

"That is not mine to say, my boy, not yet thine to question. Perhaps some day the truth shall be known to you and me. But meanwhile—"

But meanwhile, the life-skiff was theirs for the taking. This was no question to long plague Chip Warren or any other space-adventurer, before whom stretched a whole, wide universe of wonder.







Martian Caravan

"**C**AMELS, MR. CORRIGAN!" BUBBLED THE GIRL IN the tan sunsuit. "Camels! Why, it's just like being back on Earth. In Egypt or somewhere. It's so cute and romantic. I *do* hope-oooooh!"

She clutched convulsively at the pommel of her high saddle. The sleepy-eyed beast beneath her had lurched to one side. Now, gingerly, it was picking its way around a shallow pockmark in the desert sand. "Long Tom" Corrigan's sunburned arm leaped out to steady the girl. He said: "Now, see what I meant, Miss Andreisen? It isn't safe up here. You must stay back with the rest of the caravan. You really must!"

Ruth Andreisen's fragrant weight depended on Corrigan's arm for a moment—until Long Tom's bronzed neck burned redder still, and "Blinky" Billings, riding beside him, snickered aloud.

"Oh Mr. Corrigan! You're not going to be cross with poor little me, are you? Just because my silly old camel was afraid of a hole in the ground?"

Blinky snorted. Lips concealed by a week's stubble parted to emit a stream of ruddy *mekel*-juice at a horny spine of cactus.

"Camels," he drawled to the world at large, "is got more sense'n some people. Know what that there hole is, Miss Andreisen? It's a silicoid pit. An' unless I'm greatly mistook, it's got a resident."

"A—silicoid pit! Gracious!"

Long Tom grunted soberly. His job was to reassure, not frighten, the members of his caravan. But a little scare should do this particular pest no harm. He glanced back distastefully at the crude circular mound so oddly dull against the flaming red-gold bosom of the Martian sands, and pulled a wry mouth, knowing from experience what lay in wait beneath that leprous spot.

"Yes, that's a silicoid pit. You can tell 'em by the color. One step into that and—blooie! Like quicksand, only worse. Because there's a flesh-eating creature in there—waiting!"

The girl stared back at the pit, wide-eyed. A tiny, shudder stirred her soft shoulders. Then she smiled.

"But you wouldn't let anything happen to *me*, would you, Mr. Corrigan?"

Again her mount nudged closer to Long Tom's. Faint perfume tantalized his nostrils. Corrigan groaned. "Why, of course not," he said in what he hoped was an untroubled tone. "Blinky, I—I think I'll drop back along the line and see if everything's all right."

The guide nodded, squinting at the sky.

"Yeah. Better, Tom. Here comes Phobos, like a bat outa hell. We oughta pitch camp directly."

"Soon as I get back." As Corrigan wheeled his awkward mount, Ruth Andreisen smiled and tugged at her reins. "I'll go with you, Mr. Corrigan—"

"You," said Blinky curtly, "Stay here! "Ain't you," he demanded, "just a little bit ashamed o' yourself?"

Ruth Andreisen stiffened.

"Ashamed? I'm sure I don't know what you mean!"

"Not," sniffed Blinky, "much! It ain't gonna do no good, y'know. He's woman-proof. Aw, come clean! I mean the way you're carryin' on with Tom Corrigan."

"Really, Mr. Billings! You jump to conclusions, I must say. Mr. Corrigan is the leader of this caravan, is he not? And am I not a paying member of the party? I consider it my right to expect professional services and attention."

"Listen here!" Blinky wheeled to face the girl sternly, his desert-faded eyes shrewd with meaning. "Looks to me like you don't *comprende* that this here caravan ain't just a picnic. It's a tough game which is played for keeps!"

"This 'ain't Earth, Miss Andreisen. It's Mars an' where we are now, where we're goin' to, ain't even civilized yet. When we pulled out o' Mars Central two days ago, we left behind us the last hot-an'-cold runnin' water, you're gonna see for seven hundred

miles. We got almost seven days of travel ahead of us, and in this country travel is spelled *t-r-o-u-b-l-e*."

"We're gonna have boilin' hot days, an' nights cold enough to do funny things to brass monkeys. We're gonna run into sleet-storms an' mud-storms mebbe, an' dust-storms certainly. We're liable to have to do some fightin'. Vegans an' silicoids an' loopies an'—well, the whole damn' kit-an'-kaboodle of 'em, the creatures that hang around the Martian waste-lands waitin' for durned fools like us to come along."

"If you think I'm afraid—" began the girl hotly.

"Hell, no, I don't think you're afraid. If you'll pardon my Esperanto, I think you got more damn' guts than any shemale oughta have. Else you wouldn't of signed up for the trip. But I also think you done it for the same reason that you're now makin' passes at the squarest-shootin', swellest guy that ever got thin-air wabbles—Tom Corrigan."

"Because you're spoiled, Miss Andreisen. Your old man owns half o' the Cosmos Company, an' your whole family's so reekin' rich they don't know what to do. Which prob'bly explains why you're here. 'Cause you got bored on Earth an' decided to take a Martian caravan-trip for a thrill."

"Well—that's okay by me. An' by Corrigan. Only, now that you're in this to your ears—wise up! Lay off the lovey-dovey stuff and try to play ball—"

Ruth Andreisen's voice was very cold and sweet.

"I suppose you realize, Mr. Billings, that you are in the employ of the Cosmos Company? And that your delightful little sermon will cost you your job when we reach Sandy City? I hope you won't be out of work too long!" She spun her mount viciously, and was gone. Blinky sighed. There was a wan blade of clab-grass ten yards away. He speared it neatly with a shimmering stream of liquid root. The sallow sun hung like a rusted bowl in the west. A chill east wind keened across the desert. The caravan plodded on.

Long Tom Corrigan rode back along the line slowly. His watchful eyes missed nothing. He studied the harnesses of the burden beasts, paused once to loosen a chafing breeching, once to cross-lock a sliding hitch. He counted, as a matter of habit, the sleeping-tins and tarps; noted a leaking water-cask and jotted a mental reminder to fix it. He inspected the camels' pads as he rode by, cautious against bruises and small cuts. It had cost the company plenty to bring these "ships of the desert" to the red planet, even more to acclimate the delicate animals to the thin Martian air. But they were the only dependable means of conveyance across

the Martian sandy wastes. Motors were worse than useless, horses impossible. Earth's aircraft were valueless in this attenuated atmosphere, though Corrigan had heard rumors of a new invention, a new type of super-stratoplane.

He stopped beside the foremost riders of the caravan. "Hey, folks! Doing all right?"

The short, dumpy man in serge stared at him mournfully. "'All right,' he asks! *Aiee*, such a question! I know one thing, Captain Corrigan. There's a fortune waiting for the man who opens the first tourist-rest here in the desert. Millions! Such saddle-boils I got—*aiee*!"

"You'll live, Gebhardt," grinned Tom. "How about you, Reverend? You all right?"

Eagle eyes glared at him affectionately from under jungled eyebrows. "'The Lord is my strength,'" answered the scarecrow in rusty black, "'and my salvation. In Him shall I place my trust.' Verily, Brother Tom, all is well with me and mine. Can you say the same for your soul?"

"You should know," grinned Long Tom. "You've been trying to save it for years." He meant no offense; the tall preacher took none. They knew each other, these two. But then, everyone on Mars knew "Salvation" Smith, the lean-jawed missionary of the waste-lands. "We pitch camp in a few minutes. See you later."

He passed on, pausing to exchange a greeting with big Djan Kaldren, the miner, Kaldren's wife Marta, and their two youngsters, Michel and Lisa. They were undemonstrative, but Long Tom knew that in their own slow-moving, slow-thinking way they were glad to see him. Humble folk, they felt out of place in this cavalcade; they would be more at home after they were settled in a neat miner's cottage at the corporation digs in Sandy City, along with others of their kind.

In contrast to their polite semi-silence, he got a noisy greeting from the next group. Burly Mike Murphy, newly become a prospector after years as a blaster on a space-liner, roared at him joyously as he reined up beside them.

"Hey, Cap! You're just in time to settle an argyment. Sandoni, here, says I'm nuts to go prospectin'. Says that when his damn' union gits organized on Mars, the corporation'll hafta do all the huntin' an' we'll git paid to sit down all day. I say he's nuts. Whadda you say?"

"The same," said Long Tom frankly. He stared at the swarthy man. "So that's why you're going to Sandy City, eh, Sandoni? To stir up trouble amongst the miners? Watch your step, fella!"

Sandoni's laugh was more of a sneer. "Oh, another company man, eh? You don't believe in unions?"

"In unions, yes. Controlled unions, operated honestly for the mutual benefit of workers and employers alike. Not your kind of outfit. Don't forget, Sandoni, the corporation made space-flight possible, settled Mars, brought Earth a new colony and new wealth. The miners of Sandy City are a loyal bunch. Talk too long and loud, and you'll find trouble riding your coattails."

"Skip it, pal!" yawned the organizer. "You're way behind the times. When I get done with 'em, they'll be eating out of my hand."

"Or," interpolated the Third member of the group, "out of the soup-kitchen. You talk big, Sandoni, but I've met your kind before. All wind, no action." She laughed, and her voice was low-pitched, throaty. She was not, Long Tom thought, bad looking—or wouldn't be, if she gave herself half a chance. But too-blonde hair, lips too ripely crimson, blood-red nails, eyes deeply shadowed with blue, put her under suspicion.

Sandoni made an insulting reply; and Murphy swung toward him threateningly.

"*Cut it!*" Corrigan gave his mount the knee, eased between the two men. "I'll have no fighting in this caravan. If you have differences, you'll have to wait till we reach Sandy City to settle them."

Sandoni laughed. "I'll settle with you later, Murphy!" He raked his mount's flanks angrily; lurched forward. Corrigan turned an impassive face to the girl.

"I hope you'll allow me to make his apology for him, Miss Milnar. It won't happen again, believe me."

The girl's voice was deep and shaken. "That's okay, Captain. I guess he was—well, anyway, thanks! And thanks to you, Murphy. You shouldn't ought to have done it, though."

Mike Murphy mumbled: "Aw, that's all right." Long Tom rode on.

Professor Fallonby greeted him eagerly: "Ah, Captain! I was just about to ride up and ask if we couldn't stop soon. This is a *wonderful* place to make camp. Such subjects for study! I'm particularly anxious to have a closer look at that schist outcropping over there. A most interesting formation—especially in view of Dr. Longworth's theory of diluvian periods in the Early Martian era. Might we—"

"In a few minutes. I'll let Blinky ride over with you. Standing the trip well, Mrs. Barlow? Miss Fallonby?"

Both girls nodded. Long Tom couldn't help thinking that this

trek was graced with—if nothing else—lovelier examples of femininity than any other haul ever made across the forlorn land. Mrs. Barlow was, as Blinky had declared upon first setting eyes on her, “a whipperdingin’ hummeroo!” Of course, that was to be expected. Lieutenant Ki Barlow, junior officer of the Sandy City outpost, had been bragging for months about the bride he had left on Earth.

It was Joan Fallonby, though, who did crazy things to Long Tom’s usually sane thought-processes. A slender girl with skin the pale gold of wakening dawn, hair brown as the fruit of the *luublo* tree, with a quietude soft and deep and soothing as the murmur of deep waters on a forgotten sea isle. The kind of woman, Long Tom caught himself thinking, to whom a weary man, worn and drained by activity, might turn for new strength, and courage.

She said now, demurely, “We’re getting along well, thank you, Captain,” and her eyes smiled on him. Ki Barlow’s bride was more communicative. She laughed: “You really ought to spend more time with us, Captain Corrigan. We’re having so much fun! Mr. Vanderling is awfully amusing.”

Long Tom said: “Nothing like laughter to make the journey seem short. That finger of yours better, Vanderling?”

The slender, pale-haired chap said dubiously: “I—I hope so, Captain. It still throbs a little. Dr. Fallonby promised to look at it when we pitch camp. You don’t think there’s any danger of infection?”

“It’ll be all right,” said Long Tom impatiently. “Well, we’ll pitch camp now, I reckon. Get your sleeping-tins down before dark. Drane, will you help with the cooking?”

The last member of the party nodded somberly, spoke not a word, but rode to Corrigan’s side. They jogged to the fore of the caravan in awkward silence. Drane did not speak, and Long Tom didn’t know what to say. He knew, as did all of the others, Drane’s reason for joining the caravan.

Four months ago, Drane had been Lieutenant Drane, in command of the I.P.S. scoutship *Uranus*, which had crashed into a rogue planetoid nine days out of Io City. Of the crew, every man had perished save Drane, who had been picked up in a life-boat by the mailship *Iris*.

At the court-martial, the whole story had come out. On Drane had fallen the stigma of being the first man in the Interplanetary Service ever to show a yellow streak in the face of danger. Panic-stricken at the moment of impact, the young officer had abandoned his ship, cast off and fled in the only undamaged safety-skiff.

The court had named him a deserter in time of stress, branded him a coward, stripped him of his rocket and given him a suspended sentence—which was worse than a more stringent punishment, for it sent him out to face a sneering world.

Drane, Long Tom knew, would not end his journey at Sandy City. Remote as that outpost was, the story of his cowardice would dog him there. Drane had chosen that city as a “jumping-off place;” from there he would strike out alone into the barren wilderness. With luck, he might find in that desolation wealth enough to buy his way back into a certain stratum of society, a certain kind of friendship. But without luck—well, some day far removed, wondering strangers might find and bury, in grateful anonymity, the remains of ex-Space Lieutenant Howard Drane.

The last thin arc of the sun clung desperately to the horizon as they reached the head of the column. Blinky spat and swore softly.

“Beginnin’ to think you’d got yourself lost, Chief. Scenery purtier back there?” He winked, his leathery face a network of crinkles. “Or wouldn’t she give you a tumble?”

“You,” said Long Tom shortly, “talk too damn’ much. . . . Okay, we flop here. Give the signal.”

The caravan wheeled into a tight circle. The languid dromedaries, groaning like weary men, kneeled ponderously, sighed as their loads were lifted, lay quiet, jaws moving endlessly. Dark night crept in from the east. With the darkness came cold, incredibly bitter. The caravan rested.

“Its period of revolution,” said Professor Fallonby, “is seven hours, thirty-nine minutes and fourteen seconds. It is this which causes it to rise in the west and sink in the— Ah, Captain! I was just telling our friends about the lesser satellite Phobos. Perhaps you would—”

“Where’s your sleeping-tin?” demanded Long Tom.

“My—er—” Fallonby looked bewildered. “Why, on one of the camels, I suppose. I presumed that—er—you or Blinky would prepare it for me. I—”

“Go get it!” snapped Long Tom. “No—wait a minute! I’ve got something to say. The rest of you listen too. Get it straight, once and for all:

“Blinky Billings and I are your *guides* on this trip, not your nursemaids! For the past two days we’ve overlooked your little mistakes and pass-the-buck tactics, but that’s all over now. From tonight on, every member of this caravan must shoulder his share of responsibility. That includes getting down your own sleeping-

tins, washing your own dishes, sheltering your own mount each night. Blinky and I will take care of the pack-camels. . . .

“Skip it, Vanderling! If you’ve got any squawks to make, save ’em till we reach Sandy City. Tell the corporation—and see where it gets you! I know some of you folks are rich, and some of you are talented, and some of you have more brains in your left ear than I have in my whole cranium—but while we’re in the desert, you’ll do as I say.”

“Another thing—this party has been breaking into too many cliques. When I rode along the line this evening, it was more than a half-mile long. And all because of a lot of petty snobbery, jealousy and dislike. Well, from now on, that’s over too. When we ride tomorrow, we ride in close formation—in the order I designate.”

“All right, now, hop to it! Professor, go get your sleeping-tin. And don’t give me any argument; I’m not going to ride into Sandy City with a frozen Fellow of the Royal Society in my cargo. Gebhardt, bed your camel down. And make sure the tarp is over his head. Vanderling, get your dirty mess-gear washed and out of sight. The rest of you stay by this heating unit where I can keep an eye on you!”

He moved away from the hypatomic range which served as a heating plant.

The members of the party, startled looks on their faces, stirred to action. One figure, feminine despite the fat, furry night-parka so necessary on Martian evenings, followed him. Ruth Andreisen’s voice was amused.

“Well, Mr. Corrigan! The steel hand in the velvet glove, eh? You surprise me.”

Corrigan said tightly: “In the future, Miss Andreisen, you will be kind enough to address me as ‘Captain’ Corrigan. Didn’t you hear my orders? That all members of the party are to stay by the range? Now, if you please—”

“I appear,” said the girl thoughtfully, “to be making a number of mistakes today. First about Blinky. And now you. Well—” She moved away, stiffly. Her place was taken by another figure, the gangling height of the waste-land missionary.

Long Tom said: “Get back to— Oh, it’s you, Padre? Sorry about the blow-off. You weren’t included.”

Salvation Smith smiled, his breath weaving spirals in the thin, cold air. “‘Whom the Lord loveth,’ ” he said, “‘He chasteneth.’ I know, son. They had it coming to them. They’re all Earthlubbers; they don’t realize the dangers of this journey. And it is true they’ve

been splitting up into small antagonistic groups. 'Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall.'" He laid a thickly gloved hand on Corrigan's shoulder. "But now we two are alone. *Why* did you clamp down on them?"

Corrigan hesitated a moment. Then: "Loopies!" he said succinctly.

"Loopies? Here? We're too far south, Tom."

"That's what I thought. But when Blinky took the Professor over to study that rock formation, he found tracks—fresh ones. You know what they look like. Thick ribbons of slime exuded by those colloidal doughnuts as they roll—"

"Proteid, Tom," corrected Smith gently. "Like the Venusian proto-balls. 'God works in mysterious ways, His wonders to perform.' But I never could figure out why He made loopies. Foul-smelling sons of Satan! Do you have any spray-guns?"

"Four."

"I'll take one. And mind you give me a pair of new gloves, too. I got an acid-burn once in West Sacchi, fighting those loopies. Ah, me! 'Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward!' You figure seven more days on the trail, Tom?"

"About that."

"Hard riding."

"Not too hard. And we're not overburdened with rations. Besides, all the plateau springs will be dry this time of year. We'll have to get by on what water we have. Until we reach Mud River, of course."

Smith nodded. "Very good, lad. You may count on me in case of need. I'd better turn in now. Good night, and God rest you."

"Good night, Padre." Corrigan lingered in the semi-darkness for a few more minutes, puffing savagely on a cigarette, lamenting its tastelessness in the thin air. He flicked the glowing butt away, sought his sleeping-tin in the pile of duffle. Despite its seven-foot length, the vacuum-chambered cylinder of beryllium was light. He tucked his sleeping-bag inside the tin, opened the air-vents and set the thermostat. Blinky Billings strolled up beside him, stared at the cylinder lugubriously.

"Ain't they the damndest, though? Canned man. We must be nuts, Tom, to wanta live where we hafta sleep in tin cans like them. Damn' things scare me half to death, anyway. I'm alluz 'fraid I ain't gonna git the top off some mornin', an' there I'll be, stuck like a sardine without oil."

"Sixty below," said Corrigan, "Is cold. Or didn't you know? See any more tracks, Blinky?"

"Nup. But I reckon we oughta keep a watch tonight. Just in case."

"Good idea. You tuck those gallant wayfarers into their beddy-byes; I'll stand the first trick."

Blinky said: "You're leadin' this here expedition. You need your sleep. I'll stand watch."

"You heard what I told them back there? That I'll lay down the law around here? Well, that applies to you too, Blinky. I say I'll stand watch!"

Blinky chewed thoughtfully for a moment, then spat. Then drawled: "Gittin' biggety, huh? An' me old enough to be y'r pop—if you had one? Go to hell, Tom!"

Long Tom grinned. "Comets to you, pal. I'll go to sleep, instead. So long."

But he slept lightly; slight noises disturbed him; he woke once, suddenly, to peer through his quartzite face-port and find Blinky missing from before the hypatomic range. Fifteen metal night-cubicles glistened about the unit; the other members of the caravan were all right, then.

But where was Blinky? He rolled his tin, discovered that the noise which had awakened him was the sound of Blinky pegging the tarpaulin down over a restless camel. Blinky waved reassuringly, and Tom closed his eyes. Sometime later he stirred again, this time to hear harsh granules pattering against his tin. A stiff breeze was driving down from the north, bearing with it a sleet of coarse sand. The hypatomic had been turned to half power; it glowed dully in the midst of the sleepers. Blinky had taken refuge in his own tin, which was standing on its base. As Tom watched, a brief spark reddened and dimmed in the guard's tin. Blinky was awake, then, and enjoying an illicit cigarette. Long Tom murmured drowsily: "Damn' fool! He'll burn himself up—"

Then sleep found him at last, sleep burdened with dreams. He was lost in a cavern somewhere in the Crazy Mountains; a horde of vicious Vegans had traced him to his hide-out, were clamoring, now, to get him. Their thick, leafy faces were contorted with blood-lust; their wooden fingers scraped dryly at the boulder he had rolled before the cavern mouth. Clawing hands made a harsh tattoo in his ears. The sound became louder—louder—

He woke suddenly, fully awake and alarmed. Blinky was pounding on the lid of his tin, hissing through the air-vent: "Tom! Git up, lad! Loopies!"

He threw open his lid; the pale tawniness of dawn struck his eyes; his breath congealed as the warm air of his container was supplanted by the frigid morning breeze. A twist and a wriggle, and he was stamping his feet on the dry ground. Blinky thrust something into his hand—the bulbous nozzle of a spray-gun.

“Thataway. See?”

There were a good dozen of the noisome creatures. Bulging, quasi-circular blobs of grayish matter, smeary with the exudation that enabled them to propel themselves ball-wise over the desert, quivering, astir with a sentience that let them know there was warm life, flesh and blood, in the vicinity. Food!

A neighboring tin opened, and a startled face appeared: Sandoni. His morning-drowsy voice quavered: “What’s the matter, Captain?” Other tins opened. From one a figure started to emerge. Ruth Andreisen called: “Captain Corrigan! What are those things—”

“Get back in your tin!” Corrigan put his hand on the girl’s head, pushed firmly. “All of you stay where you are. You’re perfectly safe in those metal containers. Loopies won’t attack metal. No, you can’t help, Miss Andreisen! You’ll help us most by keeping quiet. They’re after the camels. —Blinky!”

“Yup, Cap?”

“Get Salvation. Give him a spray-gun—and a pair of gloves. We’ll put the run to these babies.”

“We got four guns,” reminded Blinky.

“Rouse Drane. He’s no Earth-lubber.”

In a few minutes there were four of them shivering before the hypatomic. The others watched anxiously from the face-ports of their sleeping-tins. Tom gave his orders:

“Split up; we’ll each guard a quadrant. They’re not smart; they’ll probably all attack the same spot. If so, we’ll all shift to cover that spot. Use your spray sparingly. It doesn’t take much. Just enough to set up the reaction. . . . Okay, let’s go!”

Drane said feverishly: “This gun, Captain—it’s no good! It’s only a waterpistol! I’ve got a needle-gun in my bag—”

“A needle-gun’s worthless against these things; it just destroys cells, and they can rebuild cells instantaneously. These guns spray a pepsinized fluid that acts directly on the protein matter of the loopies. Turns ’em into flaky peptones. You’ll find out!”

Long Tom spun away. The camels, sensing danger, were moaning and stirring restlessly; one or two had risen. A hundred yards away, in the quadrant Corrigan had chosen as his own, the loopies were bobbling querulously back and forth as though still

uncertain. The rising sun streaked colors of mottled hue on their slimy bodies. Long Tom wasted none of his ammunition. The spray-guns were, as Drane had said, little more than grown-up pressure pistols. Their range was approximately twenty yards; but at that, as any lesser range, they were effective. Tom waited.

The charge came suddenly. As if reaching some obscure telepathic agreement, the entire family of proto-balls wheeled and swung into action at the same time. Their glistening bodies made flapping, sucking noises at the golden sand as they rolled down upon the camel-caravan at a point between Salvation and Tom.

The two men moved closer together, placed themselves squarely before the now-squealing beasts. The loopies loomed larger, whirling upon their prey greedily, Tom yelled, "*Now!*" and his spray merged with the stream from the preacher's gun to form a greenish barrier mist.

The foremost loopie rolled headlong into the liquid, stopped as though struck with a sledge and tried to roll backward. Great brownish flakes mottled its glistening hide; the flakes spread, grew, ate deeply into the plasm beneath. The ball collapsed soggily like a pricked pan of dough; pale gases steamed upward, and a rotten, fleshy stench choked Long Tom's nostrils.

The loopies behind rolled on insensately, fell prey, like their leader, to the mist of liquid death. A half-dozen rotted into brown crustation before Salvation and Tom charged forward to account for the remaining three that, dimly aware their attack had failed, had now whisked away at dizzy speed. After one of these, Salvation fired a parting shot; the blob of matter faltered a moment, rocked, then began flaking.

Salvation clapped Long Tom on the back. "How do you like *that?*" he roared delightedly. "Winged him at thirty yards! Some shot, lad! —Our gracious Lord, look!"

Before their eyes, the wounded loopie was undergoing a strange metamorphosis. Its motion had ceased. It was no longer spherical, but had widened, thickened, broadened, into a crude dumbbell shape. As they watched, the connecting tissue divided; where there had been a single proto-ball, now were two. One whole and healthy one, one in the final stages of dissolution, even now flaking into death.

"Subdivision!" gasped Corrigan. "Well, we might have known. They're nothing but colossal cells. *Drane!*"

For the healthy daughter cell, free now of its scabrous parent, had swung in a swift arc halfway around the camp, was whirling

at frightful speed toward the quadrant supposedly guarded by Drane. But Drane's attention had been focused on the other battle; his back was to the charging loopie. Now, at Corrigan's cry, he wheeled, stared dazedly.

"Shoot it! It can't stand the spray! Shoot, damn you!"

Drane's hand squeezed once, wildly. The stream discharged yards from the spinning proto-ball. Then Drane's hand faltered, the gun dropped from nerveless fingers, and he raced to the center of the camp, his face ashen.

And one invader found its quarry! A horrid, almost human scream quavered in the air as a tethered camel strove to escape the rolling death that catapulted upon it. Then slimy pseudopods writhed from the loopie, clutching the beast in a deadly suction; the ball seemed to burst open, spreading and flowing about its prey, sucking it into its gaping maw, ingesting it.

Salvation was at Tom's side as he leaped across the open circle; their two gun-hands raised as one. But even so, they fired too late. It was Blinky Billings whose spray-gun misted the banqueting monster proteid. For a moment the ugly creature seethed and quivered and flaked sickeningly; then it disintegrated, disclosing beneath it the raw, half-devoured body of what had once been a camel.

Long Tom turned on Drane savagely.

"Blast you, man! See what you've done? Lost one of our best pack-camels! For two cents—"

He stopped. Drane's face was sheet-white; his eyes were haunted. His pale lips opened twice before words came. He said: "I—I'm sorry, Captain." He turned abruptly, moved away. His hands were tight knots at his side.

Long Tom gazed distastefully at the half-ingested body of the camel, at the puddles of slime rimming the northern arc of the camp-site. He said: "I think we'll move on a few miles before we eat, Blinky. Breakfast in these surroundings—"

Blinky scratched his head.

"Well, what about it?" he demanded.

"It's breakfast-time, aint it? Okay, then, let's eat. Cripes, don't tell me you got a weak stummick?"

Long Tom grunted: "And of course it had to be *that* camel!"

"Huh? What diff'rence does it make?" Blinky looked again, whistled softly. "Hey, one o' the grub-packers! That aint so good, Tom. About a quarter of our supplies is ruint. Whaddya think we better do? Turn back?"

"We'll eat light," said Corrigan grimly, "and keep going. All right, everyone—hike! On your toes!"

The distant sun scorched the high plateau with merciless beams. Flesh parched beneath its burning impact, tanned to coarse-grained leather beneath the constant bombardment of unshielded ultra-violets. The dunes danced in a gold haze; breathing was a strenuous effort. But Long Tom Corrigan held doggedly to his course.

He did not show by word, action or expression the disappointment he had just experienced. For ten hours he had been promising himself that when the caravan reached Yawning Springs, he would halt the procession, rest the camels and let the travelers drink their fill of fresh cold water.

Now Yawning Springs was on their right, gliding by them unnoticed, unrecognized by all save himself, Salvation Smith and Blinky. Tom dared not meet their eyes. There was no reason to stop. A few cacti wilted dispiritedly where months ago had been, where weeks hence would again be, a pool of crystal water. Now there was nothing.

There was movement from the close-packed company behind him. A jaded camel, spume-lipped and gummy of mouth, bobbed to his side. Mark Sandoni's face was blistered, raw; his voice was cracked and shrill with hysteria.

"Corrigan, for *God's* sake!"

Long Tom said mechanically: "You have been ordered to keep your place in line, Sandoni. Get back where you belong."

"I won't. You can't make me. You can't drive us like this, Corrigan. We're men, human beings—not animals! Do you realize we've been traveling for three days on short rations, at forced speed, with only a few mouthfuls of water apiece to—"

"I realize," said Long Tom tightly, "all that and more. Get back to your place!"

He turned his camel's head. The move was meant to force Sandoni's mount about, but the once dapper labor-leader was now a frayed bundle of nerves. Into the movement he read some menace; with a shrill squeal he dug heels into his animal's flanks, jolted the weaving beast forward. It plunged away from the caravan blindly, wildly.

Corrigan cried: "Look out! You damned fool, be—"

He spoke too late. At that instant the weary camel stumbled, plunged forward, fell, spilling its rider to the hot sands. Corrigan cursed. The camel's foreleg had disappeared into a dull, lack-luster pockmark. Even now, as Sandoni screamed and scrabbled out of

danger in desperate, crablike fashion, the dead patch stirred to slumberous life, widened and spread, disclosed itself as the trap it was.

The camel snorted, its breath thick and bubbling. It kicked viciously, trying to drag its foreleg from the treacherous sands, but each motion served to drag it deeper. It bellowed then, toppling forward into an ever-widening hole, feeling death upon it.

Corrigan drew his gun from its saddle holster. He cried, "Stand clear, Sandoni!—and fired. The camel ceased its struggles. Its ungainly body continued to ease slowly into the sandy trap; crimson stained the dull gold of the desert.

They stopped fifty yards beyond, waited for Sandoni to rejoin them. His face was green beneath its coat of crimson burn. He babbled: "A silicoid, Captain! A silicoid! My camel—"

"Now you know," said Corrigan, "why I lead the caravan. You haven't done much to improve conditions, Sandoni. Blinky, what can we spare most?"

"Not the grub," said Blinky ruefully, "or the water. There's a load of merchandise for the Armand Company, a load of tools and equipment for the mines, charts and instruments for the Sandy City observatory—"

"Cache that. It's Government equipment; we'll pick it up the next time. And if you lose *this* camel, Sandoni, by God, you'll *walk* to Sandy City!"

The man said defiantly: "I don't want to go to Sandy City! Not enough to die on the way there. This is the last straw. We're tired and sick and hungry. The way we're going, none of us will live to reach there. I want to turn back to Mars Central. I want to—"

"That will do. Unload the camel, Blinky."

Professor Fallonby coughed, spoke: "Perhaps—hmmm—he's right. Captain Corrigan. I think many of us feel the trip is becoming too troublesome. Perhaps we *could* turn back?"

Long Tom stared at him somberly, studied the faces of the other voyagers in turn. He said slowly: "So that's the way you feel about it? Well—you know the law of the desert. The guide bows before the majority vote. We'll have a show of hands. But—wait a minute! Before you make your choice—"

He scratched a rough sketch of their route into the sands before him. "There's Mars Central, where we started from; here's Sandy City, north and west of us on the shore of Lake Dawes. And here we are—five hundred miles west of Mars Central, five hundred from Sandy City.

"You've swum half the ocean; now you've decided that you can't make it, and you want to turn back. It's going to be just as hard either way. If we return, we've got to retravel the country we've just passed through. You know what that's been like. Bleak, desolate, not a drop of water anywhere.

"If we go forward—by tomorrow night we should be on the banks of Mud River. The terrain there is no better. But at least we'll have water again. So—" He shrugged. "It's up to you. Well, Sandoni, do you still want to go back?"

"Yes. At least we know what we have to go through. Anything may lie before us. You said yourself—"

"Vote," said Corrigan; "don't preach. Well, Salvation?"

"I have chosen my path," said the grizzled missionary gravely; "'henceforth will I cleave to it.' Let's go on to Sandy City, Tom."

"Murphy?"

"Whatever you say's good enough for me, Cap." The space-man glanced at the girl beside him. "An' for Miss Milnar, too."

"Good. Vanderling? Gebhardt?"

"I'm sick, Captain," complained the blond socialite Vanderling. "I need attention and medical care. I can't get it in Sandy City."

Gebhardt said: "I'm with you, Captain."

"One for; one against. Professor?"

"My daughter and I," said Fallonby, "would prefer to return."

The temptation hovered on Corrigan's lips to demand that the girl be allowed to speak for herself. But his eyes met hers and found them blankly obedient to her parent's wish. He nodded curtly, angry and dissatisfied. "Kaldren, the trip is hardest for you and your family because of your wife and youngsters. What would you like to do?"

Djan Kaldren said slowly: "There is work waiting in Sandy City, Captain. For happiness, a little discomfort now we can stand. We will go on."

Long Tom looked at Ruth Andreisen. Her once petal-like skin was now browned by the sun, coarsened by the whiplash of flying sands; her eyes were dark with fatigue. But she met his gaze unwaveringly. "I signed up to go to Sandy City, Captain Corrigan. I expect to go there."

That was enough. Long Tom did not even need the superfluous votes of Mrs. Barlow and Howard Drane. His jaw set. "You've heard the vote. You may all rest for a few minutes till we cache the instruments. And then—we go on!"

On and on. The blazing sun beat down upon them until dusk, its downpouring like the pressure of a massive fist. Then it sank sullenly behind the sand-dunes, and a cold wind stirred from the north, bringing with it a howling gale-lashed sandstorm. Supper, such as it was, had to be delayed four hours. The members of the party ate, finally, huddled about the cheering warmth of the hyp-atomic range. Then they sought their sleeping-tins. Salvation and Mike Murphy volunteered to stand watch.

In the morning a mouthful of water, flat and tasting of the metal that contained it—but wet. Reduced rations. Then on again, with the sun at their backs, the grating sand ever before them, about them, engulfing them in a dull silence of red waste.

On and on. And evening again, and the red of evening striped against the red of the desert; the red lowering into darkness, the tiny dot of Deimos rising to remain for its allotted three-day reign of the skies, dim satellite that ran its course sluggishly, while lesser Phobos hurtled thrice daily around the planet. And the shadows deepened. Blinky looked at his leader worriedly.

“We oughta be there by now, Tom! It’s gettin’ dark; I can’t see a damn’ thing I remember in this lousy desert. We couldn’t be lost, could we? We couldn’t of got off onto the wrong trail?”

“We could,” said Tom. “But *this* couldn’t.” He tapped his wrist-compass. “We must be near there now, Blinky. Keep looking—*There!*”

He himself did not realize, until he shouted aloud, the full extent of the strain under which he had been riding. But the word that burst from his lips was like a prayer of thanksgiving.

Before them the red desert sheered away sharply into a ribbon of green. Mud River! Water, life, the last lap of their tortured trip. Salvation Smith bared his head; in a sonorous voice he proclaimed: “‘I have looked on the waters of Canaan, O Lord, and found them sweet.’”

“We’ll go on,” said Long Tom Corrigan. “We’ll camp by the river tonight.”

The campfire spluttered cheerfully. A real *fire* of driftwood—not one of your ranges fueled with atomic energy. The camels munched their cuds gravely at the perimeter of the camp circle; about the campfire the travelers lounged, comfortably replete with food and drink, confident, now, that they would win through.

All but one. One member of the party was at Tom’s side as he stood at the river shelf, staring out across that sluggish sea of mud into a sky bright-spangled with pinpricks of light. South of

the pole star, green-shining and beckoning, was another that tormented Long Tom with a strange, nostalgic urge.

"Look," he said. "Earth! From forty million miles away it sends its message of cheer and good will. Sometimes I wonder why I ever left. Men are fools, aren't they?"

Her face, rimmed by the deep, furry parka-hood, was a white mist in the moonlight. She said quietly: "Are they, Captain?"

"You know they are." His voice was gruff; the citadel of reason toppled suddenly before the onslaught of illusion. "If they weren't, would I be standing here without—" He seized her suddenly, whirled her to face him. "Joan—" he said. "Joan—"

Her lips were cool against his, cool and yielding and quieting.

He said: "Joan, listen to me. I've never met a girl like you before. Perhaps I haven't looked; I don't know. All my life I've been a seeker, a voyager, an adventurer—"

She said, strangely: "You need so little, Captain."

"So little? I don't understand. What do you mean? Joan, I need you."

"Do you?" she said. "I wonder! Shall we—shall we go back to camp, Captain?"

Blinky Billings, amiable again, now that his belly was silenced and his cheeks stuffed with cut-plug, was regaling the voyagers with wisdom culled from years of wasteland wandering.

"And don't judge that there river," he say saying, "by the way it looks on top. Mud River, they calls it, an' a mud river it is. That there crust on the surface is so thick, some times o' year, you can almost walk on it. But that's just from the silt an' loess blowed in by the sirocco. Underneath the water's clear as—as—well, it's clear. An' it's travelin' faster than any river you ever seed or heard of. Fifty mile an hour, some calc'late; sixty, others say."

Professor Fallonby said: "But if that's true, Billings, why—er—why don't we make the last stage of our journey by boat? With a current like that."

"Puffessor!" Blinky spat disgustedly into the fire; a kindling twig hissed reproof. "I'm s'prised at you! Why, because for one thing we aint got no boats. For another, they aint no boat made which would stand the beatin' that mud river would give it. Only thing'd do any good in there'd be a submarine. Which some day the Gov'ment 'll use, I expect, to make the river naveegable."

"Don't laugh, Gebhardt. That ain't as ridiculous as it sounds. When I fust come to Mars, twenty-odd years ago, folks was laughin' at the ideer there'd be a monorail transport from Mars Central to New Chicago. But they got it now, ain't they? Anything can be done, an' Earth's engineers'll do it. Just you see!"

"Hey, Kaldren. Heave me another hunk o' wood; the durn' fire's going out. Ooops! That's it. Now, we'll—"

His chatter died suddenly. His eyes narrowed. He turned swiftly. "Chief—"

But Corrigan had already glimpsed the "branch" Kaldren had tossed the guide. So had Salvation. Both of them stepped forward. Salvation flung the thing into the flames; Corrigan said swiftly: "Well, folks, getting late! Guess we all had better turn in. Let's go, everybody—"

But Mrs. Barlow had seen the thing too. Now her voice raised in a startled little shriek. "That branch! It didn't look like a branch at all, Captain. It—it had fingers. It looked like an arm!"

Long Tom decided. He faced the travelers squarely, said in an emotionless voice: "Very well. I guess you ought to know the truth. Mrs. Barlow was more nearly right than she thinks. It was an arm. The arm of a Vegan."

A few faces remained blank. Sandoni quavered: "A Vegan, Captain? What's that?"

"It's danger," said Long Tom gravely, "in its worst form. Native outlanders of the desert country. Monstrosities devised by an outraged nature. Half animal, half vegetable. That's why they're called, 'Vegans.' They're manlike in form, thought, habit; vegetable in the fact that their bodies are covered with a tough, thick cambium."

"And that—that arm, or whatever it is?"

"Means there must be a colony of them somewhere in the vicinity. They reproduce by abscission and budding. In the breeding season they haunt the river margins in search of food. In time of need they can extract sustenance from damp soil, but—" He hesitated, then proceeded grimly: "But their favorite food is meat; their favorite meat is—*man!*"

It was not dawn yet when Long Tom wakened Billings. Hoar frost still silvered the sand, and the muddy crust of the river was caked hard; the edges of the eastern dune were but faintly rimmed with promise of the day to come. Blinky yawned once, prodigiously, then snapped into full awareness.

"Oh, you, Tom! Whazzup? 'Smatter? Vegans?"

"Everything's all right. Hasn't been a sign of 'em all night. But that doesn't mean they're not around. They've just missed seeing us so far, that's all. Come on, guy, get out of your capsule. We've got to get going."

"Where to?" Blinky climbed from his sleeping-tin obediently, strode to the fire and chafed his hands over its blaze.

"Remember Old Fort Wade? It's only about eighteen miles north of here. If we can get there—"

"Have you slipped your grays, Tom? There ain't nobody there. The place is deserted, fallin' to pieces. Since it was wiped out in the Upland Rebellion—"

"I know all that." Impatiently. "But it still has walls. And even broken gates are easier to defend than wide open spaces. Come on, get going!"

"It might not," said Blinky hopefully, "be necessary to guard nothin'. They might not ever see us."

For a while it seemed his optimism was justified. The caravan creaked into motion; refreshed camels moved at a brisk speed, and they followed the river on its northward course, entertained by the diurnal miracle of freezing-thawing that characterizes Martian bodies of water.

It was not until the old outpost was almost within sight that the alarm was given. Blinky Billings, guarding the van, loosed a wild halloo.

"Tom! There's a handful of 'em!"

Corrigan swung to Salvation.

"Take the lead, Padre! Murphy, come with me! And you, Kaldren. Got those flame-pistols I gave you last night? Come on, Blinky—" As the older man galloped up: "They may be all alone. We've got to wipe them out before they get back to their tribe and tell them—"

But the effort was in vain. The Vegans, having spotted the earthlings, had already turned and were racing toward the river base, where presumably the rest of their clan was encamped. After a short pursuit, Corrigan reined up.

"No use," he gritted. "They can run like the wind. Faster than these camels. Their light weight, and this gravity—Well, we'd better get back to the caravan. And quick."

Kaldren asked stolidly: "It means what, Captain?"

"It means that we can expect an attack. We'll dig in. And you, Blinky—you've got to ride into Sandy City."

Blinky coughed on his chaw.

"Me? Me!"

"You're the only man besides myself," said Corrigan, "who can do forty-eight hours in the saddle without falling apart. And that's what it means. Two full days' run. To get help! The rest of us," he added slowly, "will hold the fort until you get back with aid—I hope."

Blinky said: "Tom, I ain't gonna do it! You an' me been buddies a long time. I ain't never run out on a fight yet. I ain't—"

"Fifteen lives!" said Tom. "Fifteen lives depend on your bringing help. That should be fight enough for any man. See, there's the fort now. We'll pack you light, Blinky, on the swiftest camel."

Thus it was that an hour later Long Tom addressed a group from which his old friend and lieutenant was missing.

"You see these walls around you. They're damaged; the gates are worn. But they're the only things between us and the after-world. We've got to hold this fort for four days—till Blinky gets to Sandy City and brings back help. Padre, you've been working on the worst sections. Can you make them hold?"

"With the help of the Lord," said Salvation tightly, "and with a flame-pistol—they'll hold!"

Long Tom turned to Corrigan.

"Murphy, the gate? I noticed the lockbars were all broken."

Murphy grinned. "That Kaldren's a genius. He took a rafter outa the old store-shed an' is planin' it down to make a new cross-bar. It'll hold. Besides, now you can study astronomy while—"

"That'll do," said Long Tom hastily. "Now, remember—these creatures don't die as easily as the loopies. Their 'skin' is made of layer upon layer of cork cambium; it burns, but not instantly. You have literally to bathe them in the flame of your pistol."

"And they're fighters to the last ditch. Make sure you've killed one before you turn your back on him. Don't try to use an ordinary bullet gun unless you're a crack shot. The only vulnerable spot is between the eyes, dead center to the brain. And in the last resort—" He grimaced. "They're half wood. Axes, swords, anything sharp."

"Well, that's all I have to say. They're likely to plan a night attack; they see as well in the dark as in the light, and cold doesn't bother them. So—I expect every single man to stand guard tonight. The women and children will stay in the old officers' quarters."

He turned away. Two people were at his side instantly. Each started to speak, paused, waiting for the other.

"Well, what is it?" snapped Corrigan.

Ruth Andreisen spoke for both. "We don't want to sit around idly while the men are working. Isn't there something we can do?"

"Together?" he said—and immediately bit his lip. Amazement had trapped him, amazement that—the spoiled, wealthy brat could thus deliberately team up with a girl as obvious as Flossie Milner. Then he stammered: "I mean— Why, yes, of course. Get the first-aid equipment out of the packs, set up a sort of field hospital. We may need it—"

Flossie Milnar turned away without a word. Ruth Andreisen lingered a moment, her eyes flaming, her voice cold.

"As a private in your army, *Captain* Corrigan," she flared, "I have no right to question anything you do or say. But as a *woman*—"

Her fingermarks burned white against the heavy tan of his cheeks long after she had moved away.

Just before nightfall, Salvation thought he glimpsed dark figures in the shallows of the river margin which sloped, down from the east side of the fort. But by the time Corrigan reached his side, there was nothing to be seen but a slow, steamy haze, filming the mud-clotted waters, nothing to be heard but the thick suck of mud stirring sluggishly.

"It may be they, though," said Long Tom. "They're probably waiting till it's completely dark. All you men know your stations?"

He had placed his three most dependable men in the three strategic corners of the fort; he himself watched the southeast corner, that which abutted the river bank. Murphy, Smith and Kaldren held the other three positions. The fort being roughly oblong, there were stations for two others on the east and west sides. Between Murphy and Kaldren watched Herman Gebhardt and young Michel, who insisted on holding the place next to his father. Sandoni and Fallonby took their posts between Long Tom and Salvation; Vanderling was stationed at the south side; Drane had erected his sleeping-tin in the center of the north wall.

The sleeping-tins would be necessary sentry-boxes, once night fell, and the bitter cold swept in. Corrigan's orders were clear: alternate watches were to be stood at three-hour intervals. At the first sign of danger, all would be roused. Below the ramparts, in the buildings, the women had arranged their nocturnal vigil; throughout the night, one or another of them would be awake, keeping hot tea on the range, standing by to wake the others if necessary.

Dusk lingered, casting weird shadows across the thick *sudd* which caked the waters of Mud River. Even knowing, as he did, that beneath that slow-moving crust was a turbulent river boiling its ferocious way down to Lake Dawes, Long Tom found it hard to believe. The river-crust moved with almost glacial slowness; in a few hours it would be a thick sludge of frozen mud. Yet beneath the water surged on violently in a frothing channel.

"Tom!"

That was Murphy, calling his name softly. Long Tom moved from his post, glided past Vanderling, who had already sought

the warmth of his sleeping-tin, to the ex-space-man's side. "Yes?"
"Over there. Is it shadows, or—"

Darkness was complete. Phobos was gone from the sky; Deimos was little more than a first-magnitude star. It might, or might not be, a shadow. Corrigan's cheeks felt the tense, tight tingling of excitement. He said: "There's one sure way to find out!"

He whipped the heat-gun from his belt; his fingers tightened on its trigger. A thin, ruddy streamer mushroomed from its nozzle, spanned the black depths below, sought and found a victim. Light blossomed; a thin and reedy voice rang shrill with pain. Something glowed, something that turned and tried to run, but Corrigan's heat-beam followed the fleeing Vegan inexorably. There came a moment of brief, coruscating flame, the sound of snapping twigs, a convulsive moment and a crackling light.

"Gawd!" said Murphy awedly. "They burn like rotten firewood!"

"If you can keep the beam on them," reminded Corrigan tightly. "There'll be more. Wake the others!"

But that matter was already being taken care of. Salvation Smith's booming voice was enough to rouse the drowsiest slug-gard. "'Wake and gird, O sons of Israel!'" he bellowed. "'For come is the hour of thy trial!' Tom, lad! The things have surrounded us!"

As if his words had been a signal, came the attack. Grating voices cried out from the river margin below, from the wall bases on either side of the fort. From every side, scudding figures were approaching the fort. Reedy cries of pain and fury answered the flames that spat from the guns of the defenders; crude missiles sang through the air to splatter harmlessly about those within the fort.

Long Tom cried out uproariously. "Give 'em plenty of heat! They can't do us any harm at a distance. They're nothing but savages. They don't have any weapons except their fingers—"

He didn't add what he and Blinky and Salvation knew—that in close hand-to-hand conflict, there could be only one end to a fight between an earthling and a Vegan. In those gnarled, semi-wooden hands there was prodigious strength, and deadly, clawing force.

He found himself wondering, briefly, about Blinky. Had he won through? Or had the Vegans found his trail, dragged him off his camel, taken him to one of their camps?

There was no time to think of that now, though. It was fighting time. The shouts of his companions added to the roaring bed-

lam. From beside him, the weak voice of Vanderling: "Captain—I'm wounded! Oh! My—" Silence. A steady, almost exuberant singsong chant from Salvation's post. "'Who is this King of Glory? The Lord strong and mighty. The Lord mighty in battle. He is the King of Glory!' *Aaah!*" A desperate wail from the far end of the fort. "Captain! Captain Corrigan! They've broken through the split wall—"

Corrigan rapped to Fallonby on his left: "Move over here! Hold this position. Sandoni, fill in Salvation's place. Padre, come on! They need us over there!"

He raced toward the once-repaired, but now-again-ruptured vent in the wall which Murphy and Gebhardt had been defending. He paused but once when a hand found his shoulder, and Howard Drane's parka-rimmed face stared into his desperately.

"Captain Corrigan. Listen—"

Corrigan's patience snapped.

"Back to your post, you!" he gritted. "And try to fight like a man!"

He plunged on. Gebhardt had not cried out needlessly. Two uprights had been ripped by main force from the damaged west wall; through this the leafy-faced, skeletal-armed invaders were writhing. A dozen of their number were charred and smoking shards of ruin about the opening, but the others continued to sieve through. He opened fire even as he ran—then stopped; cursing. He saw, now, why Murphy's and Gebhardt's defense had been futile; the heat-ray that destroyed the Vegans also scorched greater the hole through which they entered!

He thrust his heat-gun back into his pocket, seized his automatic instead. With uncanny deadliness he accounted for two of the three who had already wriggled through the torn wall; his third bullet thudded futilely into the corky chest of a Vegan.

The Vegan's scaly face split in a grimace of unholy delight. Swift feet scraped dryly against flooring as he raced toward Murphy. The big Irishman roared angry bewilderment, hesitated. Long Tom yelled: "Run, Murph! Don't let him get near you—"

His arm raised—then lowered. Flying figures burst from the door of the women's refuge; blonde hair spilled from a parka hood as a slim figure raced toward Murphy. A heavier figure moved directly into the charging Vegan's path; an arm raised, cold starlight glinted on keen death. There was one sodden, splitting sound. The Vegan stumbled, sprawled grotesquely on the charred flooring, a gaping rent cleaving its leafy head from pate to throat.

Mrs. Kaldren grinned at Corrigan.

"Is like splitting wood, no?" she said. "Now I am glad I am splitting wood so often when I was a girl on the farm."

The heavy cleaver was balanced like a feather in her broad, work-calloused hand. Ruth Andreisen was at her side, Mrs. Barlow, Flossie, Joan. The cajoling feminine note had left the heiress' voice; there was a fighting timbre in her words.

"You men get back to your posts. We'll hold this opening!"

Cold steel, thought Long Tom! Cold steel and brave women. Murphy was tugging at his arm.

"They're right, Cap. If it hadn't of been for Flossie—"

Tom nodded, raced back to his own post. Parka-clad figures clustered menacingly about the one vulnerable spot in the entire fort; sharp steel took its toll of the dwindling numbers who tried to force that pass. And from the outer positions, cherry-hued flames burned a ring of death through the futile, screaming besiegers.

So, all the long night, they staved off sporadic attacks. But with growing confidence as the hours waned, as Earth, the evening star, dipped lower on the horizon and disappeared, as the unchanging constellations wheeled their majestic way across the purple-black vault of heaven. And in the drab shadows of dawn, the Vegans disappeared.

Hollow-eyed from want of sleep, Long Tom Corrigan made a check-up of his puny garrison.

Professor Fallonby had passed out cold. The night's strenuous activities had proved too much for his years, his diminished strength. But his condition was safe enough. A good sleep, and he would be sound again.

Flossie Milnar looked the worse for wear, with bandages crisscrossing her cheeks and forehead. She flushed at Long Tom's anxious question. "My own dumbness, Captain. I let one of them Vegans get too near me before I bopped him. Those fingers of his'n—it's like running into a brier-patch." She grinned ruefully. "Pretty this way, ain't I?"

It was on Corrigan's lips to tell her that, strangely enough, she was. Soap and water had been a preliminary stage of her first-aid treatment; the hectic flush of rouge was missing from her cheeks; her mouth was no longer a vivid scarlet slash across her face. The natural shape of her lips, noted Long Tom with mild wonderment, was soft instead of hard, warm instead of cynical, challenging.

But he said nothing. He turned, instead, to Michel Kaldren.

The fourteen-year-old youngster proudly exhibited a thumb voluminously shrouded in gauze.

"Burnt it, I did, Captain. Me, I'm a—a casualty of war, huh?"

"You are indeed," said Long Tom gravely. "And a mighty good soldier too, Michel. But if there's any more fighting, you'd better stay down here. With a hand like that, you don't want to take any chances."

"Down here? With the women?" The boy snorted disdainfully. "Not me, Captain. Anyhow, I can shoot with the other hand. Ask Pop. I'm a good shot, and I'm—I'm amphibious!"

Vanderling lay mutely on a pallet at the far side of the sick-bay. As Corrigan approached, Joan Fallonby straightened, motioned for silence. Long Tom felt a swift pang of fear shoot through him. He whispered: "It's serious? I didn't know. I thought—"

Her voice was low and accusing. "We should have turned back Captain Corrigan. Father and 'Gene both wanted to. You wouldn't let us."

Long Tom said wonderingly: "But how did he get hurt? They don't have any weapons to amount to anything. He wasn't near enough to—"

"They have slings. There's a dreadful gash in his scalp, just above the temple. A few inches lower, and—" She shuddered. "Now if you'll please go away and leave me with my patient—"

Long Tom left, abashed. Salvation Smith's eyes glinted scornfully toward Vanderling's cot as Corrigan joined him. "You've been seeing our casualty, Tom? Did you see his wound?"

"It's bad, isn't it? Joan says—"

"It would keep a rheumatic grandmother in her bed," growled Salvation, "two and a half minutes. You put iodine on bumps like that and forget them. 'Thou makest the coward to grovel, O Lord, and the weakling to quail—' Oh, well! 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit—' "

"—the girl," said Corrigan bitterly.

Salvation stared at him.

"Eh, son? What say?"

"Nothing. Skip it. Where—" Long Tom glanced up curiously. "Where's Drane?"

"Haven't seen him. Probably still in his sleeping-tin. Ahoy, up there! Sandoni! Kaldren! Is Drane in his tin?"

There was a moment's bustle on the rampart walk. Then Kaldren's slow voice, now slower still with wonderment: "No, Father. He's not up here. He's gone, and—and so is his sleeping-tin!"

Long Tom cried: "The damned fool! The damned yellow fool!"

He must have been crazy! He—" And the wasteland preacher's hand moved in the sign of the cross before him as he intoned: " 'Ashes to ashes, dust to dust—' "

"What's that for?"

"For his immortal soul, my son. He is dead by now. He was a coward; he feared death, and in seeking life surely died. I fed the camels this morning. There were none missing. Can you imagine what would happen to a man who tried to escape across this desert, walking? Carrying a night-tin? May God have mercy on his soul. . . . What's that?"

Corrigan's ears had caught the sound at the same moment. Without a word, he led the way to the lookout, found confirmation for his hunch.

"Vegans! Ten times as many of them. They've gotten their whole damned clan together; decided to wipe us out!"

"But—but in the daytime? I thought surely we were safe enough till tonight. They never attack in the daytime!"

"Maybe they don't," said Long Tom grimly, "but this doesn't look like a reception committee coming toward us. All men to your posts! Vegans!"

Weariness evaporated in the face of renewed danger. While the horde Tom had seen and heard moved closer, began to circle warily, at a distance, about the decrepit fort, the others took their positions about the walls. Holes gaped in the defense line: the posts of Fallonby, Drane, Vanderling. Corrigan sought the hospital room, strode to the side of Vanderling's cot.

"Get up! Get up and stop whimpering like a spoiled kid! This is the showdown; we need every man and woman!"

"But my head, Captain! It's—"

"Fight now," said Corrigan harshly, "or be a meal for the Vegans. Take your choice, Vanderling!"

Joan Fallonby thrust herself between them, and raised cool, unfrightened eyes. "You can see he's in no condition to fight, Captain. I'll take his place."

"You'd make a better soldier," Tom said, "at that. Come along, then."

He led the way to the position between his own and that maintained by Murphy. But there was already someone in that deserted post: Ruth Andreisen. She had dressed hastily; her hair was jammed beneath a crude mob-cap; her slim shoulders sagged beneath the weight of two bulky cartridge belts. There was a light of combat in her eyes. She spoke directly, abruptly, to Joan Fallonby.

"I'm filling this post. They'll need you below."

Corrigan opened his mouth to protest—then closed it again. For without a word Joan Fallonby had accepted the gambit, turned on her heel and was returning to the hospital. Ruth Andreisen laughed in his face, harshly.

"You continue to amaze me, *Captain* Corrigan. It's obvious how you feel about her. But I never thought you'd allow her to expose herself to a potentially dangerous position."

Corrigan snapped; "Nor will I let you! This is no place for a spoiled brat. Get below where you belong!"

Ruth Andreisen said coldly: "This *is* where I belong. A spoiled brat—you and Blinky agree on that. But I happen to be, also, the Women's Eastern Rifle Champion. Maybe your soft-mouthed light-o'-love can match *that!*"

Corrigan turned away. He felt a dull, thwarted anger within him, but it was not altogether anger. It was something else, a rankling sense of uncertainty. He had been mistaken about this girl. And she had made him swallow his mistakes.

Then he returned his attention to the advancing host, for it *was* a host, and it *was* advancing. There was something dreadful about this slow, creeping advance. It was not like last night's fruitless charge. That had been a period of high excitement, tense combat. Now there was vengeance as well as hatred and hunger in the Vegans' mien. They had gathered their full strength; come death or destruction to a score or a hundred, this time they would take the fort.

And with that determination, Corrigan knew, this attack would succeed. Not forever could a handful of Earth men and women hold a battered front against creatures whose wooden strength was as great as that of the ramparts against which they flung themselves.

Blinky? That was a wan dream now. Blinky, even if he made a record run to Sandy City, would not reach there before tonight. It would take two more days for help to arrive; one if they had sand-skis. But under heavy siege, this fort could not be held that long.

He spoke to Salvation. "We could use your blessing, Padre."

The grizzled missionary clasped his hands on the barrel of his heat-musket. His voice was low and vibrant, the only sound in the breathless silence of the fort.

"'God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble. Therefore will we not fear—'"

From the women's quarters below, a stumbling figure ap-

peared; aged Dr. Fallonby was coming to join his comrades in the last stand. He looked about uncertainly, finally took the place vacated by the runaway Drane.

“‘There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the Most High—’”

Long Tom's eyes sought the river. Its thick crust had thawed again in the burning heat of the sun; the viscous surface glistened oilily, and a spout of the fierce waters beneath broke the surface, jetted skyward like a fountain.

“‘He maketh wars to cease unto the ends of the earth; He breaketh the bow and cutteth the spear in sunder; He burneth the chariot.’”

Kaldren stood, head bowed, with his hand on his young son's shoulder. Murphy's eyes sought, restlessly, the girl in the courtyard below; Sandoni's swarthy face was immobile but somehow less sneering, more thoughtful. Salvation's voice rose to a clarion pitch.

“‘The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah!’”

“Selah!” echoed Long Tom Corrigan.

Herman Gebhardt said: “So be it!”

Then the brown horde was upon them.

Afterward, Corrigan had no clear recollection of the opening of that attack. For minutes that seemed to stretch into countless hours, he was conscious of only one thing: Of the weapon in his hands, barrel scorching his fingers, that must be raised, held upon the enemy until at least one small section of sand lay strewn with charred embers, lowered, recharged with fresh ammunition, raised again.

He caught fitful glimpses of those about him. Once he heard an exclamation of pain from the girl beside him, looked in time to see Ruth Andreisen rip a sleeve from her blouse and bind it around her left hand. Before the fingers disappeared under that swaddling blanket of silk, Long Tom saw the livid blisters searing the entire hand where the gun's breech had backfired a painful blast of flame. But she fought on.

The attackers brought with them this time ladders, crude affairs of cross-bars lashed at right angles to single uprights. They broke into little groups; each group concentrated on the task of getting one of these ladders against the fort wall. It seemed to make no difference to them how many of their brethren were lost; their force was incalculable, and for those who lived, there would be victory and food.

Long Tom adopted a swift plan, shouted it to his companions.

"Ray down the ladders!" And twice he did that very thing himself, tumbling swift-climbing Vegans back to earth as flames burned the ladder out from under them.

Below, the women held the once-again-repaired breech as valiantly as they had the night before. And this time even more effectively, because during the morning Kaldren and Mike Murphy had braced it with beams which defied the Vegans' every effort.

Flame and heat from the guns, heat from the burning sun, tumult and the crisp crackle of dying enemies, the labored breathing of those about him. The rumbling intonation of Salvation's voice, endlessly roaring Scriptural encouragement to his little flock. The angry bellow of Murphy: "Damn 'em! Winged me, Cap!" Long Tom glanced up swiftly. The burly ex-space-man was standing at his post, glaring with impotent ire at a left arm that dangled helpless from a broken shoulder. At his feet was the sling-hurled rock that had put him out of the fray. As Tom watched, Murphy stooped, smashed the rock viciously into the hate-filled faces below, and, winced as the movement rasped a file of pain through him.

Desperately Tom shouted: "Gebhardt! Move into his position!"

But another had heard Mike's shout. Flossie Milnar was already scrambling up the rampart, shoving her ax into Murphy's good right hand, wrenching the heat-gun from him. "Okay, sailor! The Ladies' Aid Society for you! I'll handle this clip-joint!"

And Mike's gun—her gun, now—spat its flame into the horde below. Mike grinned. "Some gal, huh, Cap?" And down he went to take his place beside Marta Kaldren and Mrs. Barlow.

The sun rose higher, burned a red haze before Long Tom's eyes. But there was no respite for him, nor for any of the besieged. Twice he yelled for fresh ammunition; it was brought to him by Kaldren's eleven-year-old daughter. Her face was black with grime, her body bent under the weight of the ammunition-belts; but like the others of her family, she did not seem to know the meaning of fatigue. Once Corrigan turned from blasting a ladder choked with mounting Vegans to find Joan Fallonby at his side, silently offering him a canteen. The water was almost hot and it had a metallic, brackish flavor, but it moistened his parched mouth, put new strength into him. He nodded his thanks, gulping. "Vanderling?" he gasped.

She motioned to the courtyard below. Vanderling had finally come from sick-bay, and was standing guard over one of the precariously mended gates. His face was pallid, but he was there.

Long Tom said: "Anything can happen, can't it? If even that fellow'll fight—"

Joan Fallonby said: "I told you once you didn't understand women, Captain. You don't understand men, either. He's a braver man than you. You love fighting, but he hates and loathes and fears it. It is harder for him to be there below than for you—"

She stopped and slipped away. Ruth looked at Corrigan, an impish smirk unsuccessful because her hair had tumbled down about her eyes; her face was scratched and dirty; sweat had streaked a network of white channels down her cheeks and throat.

"And they were such nice ears too, Captain," she mocked.

"What?"

"But that's all right. They look nice pinned back that way." Then she returned to her endless order of fire, reload, fire again.

Thus for what seemed to Long Tom Corrigan hours. The end came suddenly. One moment the battle was in stalemate. The next—

"Captain!"

That was Fallonby's voice, quavering fearfully. Tom glanced up, moved. The enemies' plan of attack had finally achieved success. Somehow, despite the withering fire from above, an entrance had been effected. Fallonby was stumbling backward from his post; where he had stood a moment before, a green-grown, leafy head was thrusting itself upward. Another—another! Barky arms rasped on the ramparts as the Vegans threw themselves up the ladder, over the wall, into the fort itself.

Kaldren and Smith had necessarily turned their fire into the heart of this new threat. But in doing so, they had to stop guarding against the ground crews that strove to erect ladders in *their* positions.

The first Vegans to gain the fort died beneath a raking cross-fire that smoldered them into oblivion. But for every one who died, there were two more clambering over the wall; for every two who clambered over the wall, there were a dozen others thrusting swift ladders into other positions.

Corrigan bawled: "Drop back! Everyone drop back immediately. To the officers' quarters! You below, there, get out of sight. We'll make a last stand in the building!"

He was the last to leave the rampart. He saw that Ruth Andreisen was down, Gebhardt, Flossie, the Kaldrens and Fallonby. Vanderling, Joan and Mrs. Barlow had already taken refuge in the new position, were hastily shuttering the windows of the old

officers' quarters. Long Tom and Salvation gathered up Mrs. Kaldren and her daughter, thrust them before them into the last defense post. Gebhardt threw his weight against the door.

"Wait! Murphy—where is he?"

That was Flossie Milnar. Vanderling said: "In the supply-shed. He went for more ammunition. Here—here he comes now!"

The injured Irishman was racing—if his lumbering pace could be called that—across the flagstoned courtyard. His shoulders were weighted low with ammunition, supplies, canteens. But his motion was as that of a snail compared to the swiftness of the Vegans, who, screaming reedy exultation, were now dropping from the walls like leafy rain, charging across the courtyard toward him.

"He'll never make it!" groaned Salvation. Flossie screamed. Long Tom roared: "If he doesn't, we're sunk! We need those supplies!" He broke for the doorway.

But a short, swarthy figure blocked his passage. Mark Sandoni's dour grin had a trace of his old mockery. "Equal rights for all, Captain. You're needed here. This is my job."

They were all witness to the last great madness of Mark Sandoni. He had dropped his rifle; his hairy paws clutched two flaming heat-guns. He waddled through the doorway and called to Murphy.

"This way, sucker. Get the lead out of your pants! I'll hold 'em!"

His rays burned a corridor of death through which the stumbling burden-bearer could plunge toward him, past which the Vegans dared not advance. He stalked forward on mincing feet, shrewd-eyed, daring, calculating. As Murphy reached his side, he reversed his weapons to keep open the avenue to the shelter.

The Vegans, unable to reach their intended prey, vented their fury on the newcomer who had made his escape possible. With mad squealings they flooded down upon Sandoni, a deluge of ravening woody terror.

The guns in Sandoni's hands were the ruddy balance of life and death; they spat an incessant stream of fire into the attackers. A dozen, two dozen, withered into lifelessness before that flaming stream. The red flames began to move backward as Sandoni retreated toward the door. Long Tom's heart gave a leap.

"He's done it! Murphy, drop that stuff here, and rest, man! Come on, Salvation! If it's a fight they want, we'll give 'em one! Hold on, Sandoni! We'll get you out of there!"

Sandoni's olive features turned toward the building in swift anger.

“Damn it, I say no! Shut the doors! Can’t you see—”

They could see. Even as he spoke, the heat-gun in his right hand had faded out, its charge exhausted. And from that side the Vegans, twiggy fingers clawing hungrily, were moving in on him. And now the other gun’s charge had run its course. Its red beam faded into an orange, to a wan yellow, wavered and disappeared.

“Sandoni! Sandoni!”

That was Mike Murphy. There were unashamed tears on the big Irishman’s face, his voice was high and tremulous as that of a girl.

“Sandoni!”

Then they were upon him. Long Tom saw the first woody fingers groping for the laborite’s throat, saw the torrent of vengeful Vegans piling upon him like a writhing heap of faggots. He shuddered and turned away.

“Close the door,” he said.

It was Djan Kaldren who broke the silence that followed. In a quiet, unimpassioned voice he asked! “How long, Captain? How long you think, before—”

Long Tom said somberly: “It’s hard to tell. Maybe hours. Perhaps a whole day. At least we have here a solid building. They can’t smoke us out because they fear flame worse than we do. They can’t starve us out, thanks to Mike and Sandoni. But they know how to use tools when they find them. And there are tools in the supply-shed. They’ll break down the walls. And then—”

Salvation said: “There is nothing we can do now but wait—and pray. Blinky, Tom?”

“We’ll have to pray a long time.” Grimly! “He’s almost to Sandy City by now, if he got through at all. But it’ll take another two days or so before we can expect help. By that time—”

Murphy said: “We’re not going to get two days, Cap. Do you hear what I hear?”

Through the bedlam that howled outside, they heard other noises—the sound of heavy objects being dragged across the courtyard, mutterings among the Vegans, rasping sounds of metal being tested against wood. Long Tom moved to one of the shuttered windows, squinted through a chink. There was someone at his side. Ruth Andreisen said wearily: “Yes, Captain?” Tom shrugged.

“Taps for us! As I feared, they’ve found the tools. They’re going to dig us out of here while the fever is on them. A tough break for you, sister. You had everything you wanted on Earth. But you came here to find—this.”

The girl smiled wanly.

"Must you always be wrong, Captain? I didn't have everything I wanted on Earth. I came to Mars seeking adventure. I found it. And I—I found something else, too."

"Something else?"

"You wouldn't understand. You never do. Anyway, you've gone all calf-eyed over that pale little nincompoop who—Oh, damn you, Captain Corrigan! You're self-satisfied and dictatorial and brave and stupid, and I must be crazy, but—" Her hands were on his cheeks, drawing his face down to hers. Then she thrust him away, and there was something like a sob in her voice. "Isn't it silly, Captain Corrigan? That the thing I found should have been *you*? And that you were too blind to see it while there was still time?"

Corrigan said dazedly: "Ruth! Ruth—"

But she was gone. And Salvation was at his elbow.

"The rear wall, Tom. The one without windows. They're drilling it into cheese. This is going to be a sorry last stand."

Tom Corrigan's cheeks were flaming, as were his eyes. "That's where you're wrong, Padre! It's going to be the damndest last stand anyone ever made! Die, eh? I won't die now if I have to *saw* my way through the whole mob!

"Murphy—you and the gals get on that rear wall. Bust drills, fire through the holes they make, do everything you can to slow them up.

"Vanderling, you and Gebhardt and Michel lay out all the guns and ammunition we have on that table, arrange them so we can have easy access. Padre, come with me! There's a skylight through this roof. We're going up topside and raise hell with these Vegans. . . . *Listen!*"

The tumult from outside had altered subtly. Raw, grating voices were raising in a note of apprehension; there were sounds of frantic movement. And above all, there was a dull, throbbing sound that sounded like, must be—

"But it couldn't be!" cried Long Tom. "There's no such thing on Mars! And anyway, how would they know—"

But he was racing toward the ladder that led to the skylight. As he ran, the sounds outside became more definite—and they *were* sounds of flight! There came another sound, the sharp, crackling hiss of a Mallory-gun; shrieks of pain accompanied it. The throbbing sound grew nearer and nearer.

With fumbling hands that bruised themselves on rusty locks, Long Tom broke open the skylight. The raw red sun of Mars spilled rusty gold into the room. The sky burned blue above, but

Corrigan had no eyes for the sky. What he saw was a silver giant settling to earth at the fort, a giant metal monster from whose gun-ports spewed the death and destruction which was driving the Vegans to their lairs like scared rabbits!

On the prow of this vessel was an emblem: the red star and pyramid of the Border Patrol. And from the lock of the vessel, as it bellied gently to ground, surged a company of dun-clad constabulary.

And in the van of these rescuers was one in tattered garments at the sight of whom Long Tom's mouth dropped open. There was little strength in his gasp of recognition:

"Drane!"

Colonel Larch said proudly: "No, Captain, we won't think of allowing you to ride the rest of the way into Sandy City. The last caravan has fought its way across the Martian wastelands. From now on, travelers will journey in comfort and peace. Now that we have *this!*"

His eyes rested happily on the huge aircraft that had borne his company to Old Fort Wade, that soon would carry the battle-worn caravan to Sandy City.

"We've been hearing rumors for months, of a new type of aircraft that would fly in the thin Martian atmosphere. It arrived only last week. The boys were frantic, hoping for a chance to try it out. Then your messenger came—"

Corrigan said confusedly:

"I—I still don't understand, Colonel. How did—"

Drane said: "In my sleeping-tin, Captain. I remembered what Blinky had said about the terribly swift current underlying the surface mud of Mud River. And I knew he would never reach Sandy City in time to bring help. I tried to tell you what I was going to do, but—" He stopped, his cheeks reddening.

Long Tom remembered, then, his last words to Drane. And he too flushed. Colonel Larch stared from one to another of them and said: "It was a feat of bravery that will be remembered in Sandy City for a long while. You should have seen this man when he arrived, Captain. He was battered and bruised almost beyond recognition. He was half frozen with cold. Those waters are icy, as well as fierce. He arrived before dawn, too, and had to lie there under water, before the dam, two hours before the crust thawed enough to let him break his way through. It was, if you'll permit me to say so, a very gallant thing, Mr. Thompson!"

Drane said: "Thompson?"

"And," continued the Colonel imperturbably, "I've been wait-

ing impatiently to offer this suggestion. You seem to be a strong, courageous, intelligent young man with no particular aim in life. I wonder if I couldn't interest you in becoming a member of the Border Patrol? We're a rough and ready bunch, but we respect a man with guts. A man who can, when the chips are down, come through, fight his way back, so to speak."

Drane's laughter was harsh and half bitter.

"Sorry, Colonel. You've got me all wrong. I wish I were those things you say. I'm Drane—Howard Drane. The man who—"

"I'm sorry," said Colonel Larch querulously, "but I don't hear very well. Would you speak a little louder—Mr. Thompson?"

Salvation Smith gripped Drane's arm tightly. "The Colonel is right," he said. "Drane is dead, We buried him yesterday. Sandy City is a new world. A man can forget the past there, start over."

Drane looked at Corrigan. Long Tom nodded. And the Colonel said: "Well, Thompson? Your answer?"

He was a new man. There was a new lift to his shoulders, a new light in his eyes; a spark of reckless daring that Long Tom could understand and love. He raised his hand in gay salute. And—

"Very good, sir," he said. "Recruit Thompson reporting for duty, sir!"

For the last time, Tom returned to the pack-train. He hated to leave the camels here; he felt it was his duty to see them safely to Sandy City. But Colonel Larch was right. The day of the caravan was over. Soldiers would take these beasts back to Sandy City. There was no longer need of them. Now that aircraft had come to Mars, the desert would flower like a garden. Civilization would sweep across the face of the desolation; the frontier would be pushed back and ever farther back. He sighed.

Mike Murphy stood beside him, his arm linked through that of Flossie Milnar. He said: "Cap, howdja like to be a best man?"

"A best—" Long Tom grinned. He approved of this new Flossie Milnar. She would make the burly spaceman a better wife than some flighty fibber-tigibbet who hadn't been through the mill, who hadn't learned to recognize worth through black experience. "Swell!" he said. "I'd like it fine. Only—a prospector leads a rough life, Mike. I don't think it would be so pleasant for Flossie."

Mike Murphy said slowly: "I'm not goin' prospectin', Cap. I changed my mind. I'm gonna pick up Sandoni's job. It's the only way I can show—Well, anyhow, there's good unions an' bad. We'll build us a good union at Sandy City, make it fair an' square for

the workers. The Mark Sandoni Chapter of the Allied Mine Workers."

Colonel Larch called: "Ready, Captain? We'll take off as soon as you're ready."

"Right away," answered Long Tom. He moved toward the plane. It was funny, in a way, he couldn't help thinking what a laugh it would be on Blinky when he got to Sandy City to find them already there. For old Blinky would make it. There wasn't much doubt about that!

Vanderling brushed by him; Joan Fallonby paused at his side momentarily. She said evenly: "A happy ending after all, Captain." Her eyes were glowing. Long Tom, staring into them, wondered briefly how he had ever thought this was the girl for him.

He knew, now, that what he had mistaken, for quietude in Joan Fallonby was merely a placid, almost bovine stupidity, unreasoning acquiescence to the will of others. Her lips, so cool and soothing, were the chaste lips of a woman who was the eternal mother, the guardian, the nurse. Not the kind of woman who would stir a fighting man's heart to greater heights but the kind who would drain him of all eagerness, turn him into a dull sit-by-the-fire.

Vanderling was her man. His very weakness brought forth the fierce maternalism within her. Long Tom nodded. He said: "Yes, Miss Fallonby. A happy ending."

Then his eyes turned, questing. They found Ruth at the door of the plane, searching him. And he moved forward with a strange, hot, eagerness. He knew, now, what he wanted—what he must have: A woman whose will was as steel-strong as his own, whose heart was as mad and courageous, whose feet—like his own—burned endlessly for the soil of far, lost lands. A reckless, daring woman, who would seek, with him, adventure in the ends of the universe, asking nothing, giving all. A selfish, careless, headstrong woman with a temper of flame and a melting swiftness of heart that would burn her lips upon his own. A woman like Ruth Andreisen.

Their hands met and clung briefly. Then she drew him with her into the plane, into the seat that, as in the future they would share all things, they were now to share together.

Behind them the tawny sun wearily lurched toward a beckoning horizon. Its dying rays streaked the desert with dancing gold. A forsaken camel moaned and bubbled fretfully. Motors thrummed; sand grated beneath their skids. The day of the caravan was ended.





Wanderers of the Wolf Moon

They were marooned on Titan, their ship wrecked, the radio smashed. Yet they had to exist, had to build a new life on a hostile world. And the man who assumed command was Gregory Malcolm, the bespectacled secretary—whose only adventures had come through the pages of a book.

SPARKS SNAPPED OFF THE SWITCHES AND FOLLOWED him to the door of the radio turret. Sparks was a stunted, usually-grinning, little redhead named Hannigan. But he wasn't grinning now. He laid an anxious hand on Greg's arm. "If I was you," he said, "if I was you, Malcolm, I don't think I'd say nothing to the boss about this. Not just yet, anyhow."

Greg said, "Why not?"

Sparks spluttered and fussed and made heavy weather of answering.

"Well, for one thing, it ain't important. It would only worry him. And then there's the womenfolks, they scare easy. Which of course they ain't no cause to. Atmospherics don't mean nothing. I've rode out worse storms than this—plenty of times. And in worse crates than the *Carefree*."

Greg studied him carefully from behind trim plasta-rimmed spectacles. He drew a deep breath. He said levelly, "So it's *that* bad, eh, Sparks?"

"What bad? I just told you—"

"I know. Sparks, I'm not a professional spaceman. But I've studied astrogation as few Earthlubbers have. It's been my hobby for years. And I think I know what we're up against."

"We hit a warp-eddy last night. We've been trapped in a vortex for more than eight hours. Lord only knows how many hundreds of thousands of miles we've been borne off our course. And now we've blasted into a super-ionized belt of atmospherics. Your radio signals are blanketed. You can't get signals in or out. We're a deaf-mute speck of metal being whirled head-long through space. Isn't that it?"

"I don't know what—" began Sparks hotly. Then he stopped, studied his companion thoughtfully, nodded. "O.Q.," he confessed, "that's it. But we ain't licked yet. We got three good men on the bridge. Townsend . . . Graves . . . Langhorn. They'll pull out of this if anybody can. And they ain't no sense in scaring the Old Man and his family."

"I won't tell them," said Greg. "I won't tell them unless I have to. But between you and me, what are the odds against us, Sparks?"

The radioman shrugged.

"Who knows? Vortices are unpredictable. Maybe the damn thing will toss us out on the very spot it picked us up. Maybe it will give us the old chuckeroo a million miles the other side of Pluto. Maybe it will crack us up on an asteroid or satellite. No way of telling till it happens."

"And the controls?"

"As useless," said Sparks, "as a cow in a cyclone."

"So?"

"We sit tight," said Sparks succinctly, "and hope."

Malcolm nodded quietly. He took off his spectacles, breathed on them, wiped them, replaced them. He was tall and fair; in his neat, crisply pressed business suit he appeared even slimmer than he was. But there was no nervousness in his movements. He moved measuredly. "Well," he said, "that appears to be that. I'm going up to the dining dome."

Sparks stared at him querulously. "You're a queer duck, Malcolm. I don't think you've got a nerve in your body."

"Nerves are a luxury I can't afford," replied Greg. "If anything happens—and if there's time to do so—let me know."

He paused at the door. "Good luck," he said.

"Clear ether!" said Sparks mechanically. He stared after the other man wonderingly for a long moment, then went back to his control banks, shaking his head and muttering.

Gregory Malcolm climbed down the Jacob's-ladder and strode briskly through the labyrinthine corridors that were the entrails of the space yacht *Carefree*. He paused once to peer through a



perilens set into the ship's port plates. It was a weird sight that met his gaze. Not space, ebony-black and bejewelled with a myriad flaming splotches of color; not the old, familiar constellations treading their everlasting, inexorable paths about the perimeter of Sol's tiny universe, but a shimmering webwork of light, so tortured-violet that the eyes ached to look upon it. This was the mad



typhoon of space-atmospherics through which the *Carefree* was now being twisted, topsy-turvy, toward a nameless goal.

He moved on, approaching at last the quartzite-paned observation rotunda which was the dining dome of the ship.

His footsteps slowed as he composed himself to face those within. As he hesitated in the dimly-lighted passage, a trick of lights on glass mirrored to him the room beyond. He could see the others while they were as yet unaware of his presence. Their voices reached him clearly.

J. Foster Andrews, his employer and the employer of the ten

thousand or more men and women who worked for Galactic Metals Corporation, dominated the head of the table. He was a plump, impatient little Napoleon. Opposite him, calm, graceful, serene, tastefully garbed and elaborately coiffured even here in deep space, three weeks from the nearest beauty shop, sat his wife, Enid.

On Andrews' right sat his sister, Maud. Not young, features plain as a mud fence, but charming despite her age and homeliness simply because of her eyes; puckish, shrewdly intelligent eyes, constantly aglint with suppressed humor at—guessed Greg—the amusing foibles and frailties of those about her.

She gave her breakfast the enthusiastic attention of one too old and shapeless to be concerned with such folderol as calories and dietetics, pausing only from time to time to share smidgeons of food with a watery-eyed scrap of white, curly fluff beside her chair. Her pet poodle, whom she called by the opprobrious title of "Cuddles."

On J. Foster's left sat his daughter, Crystal. She it was who caused Gregory Malcolm's staid, respectable heart to give a little lurch as he glimpsed her reflected vision—all gold and crimson and cream—in the glistening walls. If Crystal was her name, so, too, was crystal her loveliness.

But—Greg shook his head—but she was not for him. She was already pledged to the young man seated beside her. Ralph Breadon. He turned to murmur something to her as Greg watched; Greg saw and admired and disliked his rangy height, his sturdy, well-knit strength, the rich brownness of his skin, his hair, his eyes.

The sound of his own name startled Greg.

"Malcolm!" called the man at the head of the table. "Malcolm! Now where in blazes is he, anyhow?" he demanded of no one in particular, everyone in general. He spooned a dab of liquid gold from a Limoges preserve jar, tongued it suspiciously, frowned. "Bitter!" he complained.

"It's the very *best* Martian honey," said his wife.

"Drylands clover," added Crystal.

"It's still bitter," said J. Foster petulantly.

His sister sniffed. "Nonsense! It's delightful."

"I say it's bitter," repeated Andrews sulkily. And lifted his voice again. "*Malcolm! Where are you?*"

"You called me, sir?" said Malcolm, moving into the room. He nodded politely to the others. "Good morning, Mrs. Andrews . . . Miss Andrews . . . Mr. Breadon. . . ."

"Oh, sit down!" snapped J. Foster. "Sit down here and stop bobbing your head like a teetotum! Had your breakfast? The honey's no good; it's bitter." He glared at his sister challengingly. "Where have you been, anyway? What kind of secretary are you? Have you been up to the radio turret? How's the market today? Is Galactic up or down?"

Malcolm said, "I don't know, sir."

"Fine! Fine!" Andrews rattled on automatically before the words registered. Then he started, his face turning red. "Eh? What's that? Don't know! What do you mean, you don't know? I pay you to—"

"There's no transmission, sir," said Greg quietly.

"No trans—nonsense! Of course there's transmission! I put a million credits into this ship. Finest space-yacht ever built. Latest equipment throughout. Sparks is drunk, that's what you mean! Well, you hop right up there and—"

Maud Andrews put down her fork with a clatter. "Oh, for goodness sakes, Jonathan, shut up and give the boy time to explain! He's standing there with his mouth gaping like a rain-spout, trying to get a word in edgewise! What's the trouble, Gregory?" She turned to Greg, as Jonathan Foster Andrews wheezed into startled silence. "*That!*"

She glanced at the quartzite dome, beyond which the veil of iridescence wove and cross-wove and shimmered like a pallid aurora.

Greg nodded. "Yes, Miss Andrews."

Enid Andrews spoke languidly from the other end of the table. "But what is it, Gregory? A local phenomenon?"

"You might call it that," said Greg, selecting his words cautiously. "It's an ionized field into which we've blasted. It—it—shouldn't stay with us long. But while it persists, our radio will be blanketed out."

Breadon's chestnut head came up suddenly, sharply. "Ionization! That means atmosphere!"

Greg said, "Yes."

"And an atmosphere means a body in space somewhere near—" Breadon stopped, bit his lip before the appeal in Malcolm's eyes, tried to pass it off easily. "Oh, well—a change of scenery, what?"

But the moment of alarm in his voice had not passed unnoticed. Crystal Andrews spoke for all of them, her voice preternaturally quiet.

"You're hiding something, Malcolm. What is it? Is there—danger?"

But Greg didn't have to answer that question. From the doorway a harsh, defiantly strident voice answered for him. The voice of Bert Andrews, Crystal's older brother.

"Danger? You're damn right there's danger! What's the matter with you folks—are you all deaf, dumb and blind? We've been caught in a space-vortex for hours. Now we're in the H-layer of a planet we can't even see—and in fifteen minutes or fifteen seconds we may all be smashed as flat as pancakes!"

The proclamation brought them out of their chairs. Greg's heart sank; his vain plea, "Mr. Andrews—" was lost in the medley of Crystal's sudden gasp, Enid Andrews' short, choking scream and J. Foster's bellowing roar at his only son. "Bert—you're drunk!"

Bert weaved precariously from the doorway, laughed in his father's face.

"Sure I'm drunk! Why not? If you're smart you'll get drunk, too. The whole damn lot of you!" He flicked a derisive hand toward Greg. "You too, Boy Scout! What were you trying to do—hide the bad news from them? Well, it's no use. Everybody might as well know the worst. We're gone geese . . . geeses . . . aw, what the hell! Dead ducks!" He fell into a chair, sprawled there laughing mirthlessly with fear riding the too-high notes of his laughter.

J. Foster turned to his secretary slowly. His ire had faded; there was only deep concern in his voice.

"Is he telling the truth, Malcolm?"

Greg said soberly, "Partly, sir. He's overstating the danger—but there *is* danger. We are caught in a space-vortex, and as Mr. Breadon realized, the presence of these ionics means we're in the Heaviside-layer of some heavenly body. But we may not crack up."

Maud Andrews glanced at him shrewdly. "Is there anything we can do?"

"Not a thing. The officers on the bridge are doing everything possible."

"In that case," said the older woman, "we might as well finish our breakfast. Here, Cuddles! Come to momsy!" She sat down again. Greg looked at her admiringly.

Ralph Breadon stroked his brown jaw. He said, "The life-skiffs?"

"A last resort," said Greg. "Sparks promised he'd let me know if it were necessary. We'll hope it's not—"

But it was a vain hope, vainly spoken in the last, vain moment. For even as phrased the hopeful words, came the sound of swift, racing footsteps up the corridor. Into the dining dome burst Hannigan, eyes hot with excitement. And his cry dispelled Greg's final hopes for safety.

"Everybody—the Number Four life-skiff—*quick!* We've been caught in a grav-drag and we're going to crash!"

II

Those next hectic moments were never afterward very clear in Greg Malcolm's memory. He had a confused recollection of hearing Sparks' warning punctuated by a loud, shrill scream which he vaguely identified as emanating from Mrs. Andrews' throat . . . he was conscious of feeling, suddenly, beneath his feet, the sickening, quickening lurch of a ship out of control, gripped by gravitational forces beyond its power to allay . . . he recalled his own voice dinning in his ears as, incredibly, with Sparks, he took command of the hasty flight from the dining dome down the corridor to the aft ramp, up the ramp, across girdered beams in the superstructure to the small, independently motored rocket-skiff cradled there.

He was aware, too, of strangely disconnected incidents happening around him, he being a part of them, but seeming to be only a disinterested spectator to their strangeness. Of his forcing Maud Andrews toward the door of the dome . . . of her pushing back against him with all the weight of her body . . . of her irate voice, "Cuddles! I forgot him!" Then the shrill excited yapping of the poodle cradled against her as they charged on down the corridor.

J. Foster waddling beside him, tugging at his arm, panting, "The officers?" and his own unfelt assurance. "They can take care of themselves. It's a general 'bandon ship." Enid Andrews stumbling over the hem of a filmy peignoir . . . himself bending to lift her boldly and bodily, sweating palms feeling the warm animal heat of her excited body hot beneath them . . .

Crystal Andrews stopping suddenly, crying, "'Tina!" . . . and Hannigan's reply, "Your maid? I woke her. She's in the life-skiff." Bert Andrews stopping suddenly, being sick in the middle of the corridor, his drunkenness losing itself in the thick, sure nausea of the ever-increasing unsteadiness beneath their feet.

Then the life-skiff, the clang of metal as Hannigan slammed the port behind the last of them, the fumbling for a lock-stud, the

quick, grateful pant of the miniature hypos, and a weird feeling of weightlessness, rushingness, hurtlingness as his eardrums throbbed and his mouth tasted brassy and bloody with the fierce velocity of their escape.

Sense and meaning returned only when all this ended. As one waking from a nightmare, Greg Malcolm returned to a world he could recognize. A tiny world, encased within the walls of a forty-foot life-skiff. A world peopled too scantily. Andrews, his wife and sister, his son and daughter; 'Tina Laney, the maid; Breadon, Hannigan, young Tommy O'Doul, the cabin-boy (though where he had come from, or when, Greg did not know). And himself. In a life-skiff. In space.

Somewhere in space. He looked through the *perilens*. What he saw then he might better never have seen. For that shimmering pink-ochre veil had wisped away, now, and in the clean, cold, bitter-clear light of a distant sun he watched the death-dive of the yacht *Carefree*.

Like a vast silver top, spinning heedlessly, wildly, it streaked toward a mottled gray and green, brown and dun, hard and crushing-brutal terrain below. Still at its helm stood someone, for even in that last dreadful moment burst from its nose-jets a ruddy mushroom of flame that tried to, but could not, brake the dizzy fall.

For an instant Greg's eyes, stinging and wet, thought they glimpsed a wee black mote dancing from the bowels of the *Carefree*; a mote that might be another skiff like their own. But he could not be sure, and then the *Carefree* was accelerating with such violence and speed that the eye could see it only as a flaming silver lance against the ugly earth-carcass beneath, and then it struck and a carmine bud of flame burst and flowered for an instant, and that was all. . . .

And Greg Malcolm turned from the *perilens*, shaken.

Hannigan said, "It's over?" and Greg nodded.

Hannigan said. "The other skiffs? Did they break free, or were they caught?"

"I don't know. I couldn't see for sure."

"You must have seen. Are we the only ones?"

"I couldn't see for sure. Maybe. Maybe not."

Then a body scrambled forward, pressing through the tightness of other huddled bodies, and there was a hand upon his elbow. "I'll take over now, Malcolm."

It was Ralph Breadon. Gregory looked at him slowly, uncom-

prehendingly at first. His hand was reluctant to leave the guiding-gear of the small ship which was, now, all that remained to them of civilization and civilization's wondrous accomplishments. He had not realized until this moment that for a while . . . for a short, eager, pulse-quickenning while . . . on his alertness, in his hands, had depended the destinies of ten men and women. But he knew, suddenly and completely, that it was for this single moment his whole lifetime had waited. It was for this brief moment of command that some intuition, some instinct greater than knowledge, had prepared him. This was why he, an Earthlubber, had studied astro-gation, made a hobby of the empire of the stars. That he might be fitted to command when all others failed. And now—

And now the moment was past, and he was once again Gregory Malcolm, mild, lean, pale, bespectacled secretary to J. Foster Andrews. And the man at his side was Ralph Breadon, socialite and gentleman sportsman, trained pilot. And in Malcolm the habit of obedience was strong. . . .

"Very well, sir," he said. And he turned over the controls.

What happened then was unfortunate. It might just as well have happened to Malcolm, though afterward no one could ever say with certainty. However that was, either by carelessness or malfunction or inefficiency, once-thwarted disaster struck again at the little party on the life-skiff. At the instant Breadon's hand seized the controls, the skiff jerked suddenly as though struck with a ponderous fist, its throbbing motors choked and snarled in a high, rising crescendo of torment that lost itself in supersonic heights, and the ship that had been drifting easily and under control to the planet beneath now dipped viciously.

The misfortune was that too many huddled in the tiny space understood the operation of the life-skiff, and what must be done instantly. And that neither pilot was as yet in control of the ship. Breadon's hand leaped for the Dixie rod, so, too, did Malcolm's—and across both their bodies came the arm of Sparks Hannigan, searching the controls.

In the scramble someone's sleeve brushed the banks of control-keys. The motors, killed, souged into silence. The ship rocked into a spin. Greg cried out, his voice a strange harshness in his ears; Breadon cursed; one of the women bleated fearfully.

Then Breadon, still cursing, fought all hands from the controls but his own. And the man was not without courage. For all could see plainly, in the illumined *perilens*, how near to swift death that moment of uncertainty had led them. The skiff, which an instant before had been high in the stratosphere of this unknown planet

. . . or satellite or whatever it might be . . . was now flashing toward hard ground at lightning speed.

Only a miracle, Greg knew, could save them now. An impulse spun his head, he looked at Crystal Andrews. There was no fear in her eyes. Just a hotness and an inexplicable anger. Beside her was the other girl, the maid, 'Tina; she was frankly afraid. Her teeth were clenched in her nether lip, and her eyes were wide and anxious, but she did not cry out.

Only a miracle could save them now. But Breadon's hands performed that miracle; his quick, nerveless, trained hands. A stud here . . . a lever there . . . a swift wrenching toss of the shoulders. His face twisted back over his shoulder, and his straining lips pulled taut and bloodless away from his teeth. "Hold tight, folks! We're going to bounce—"

Then they struck!

But they struck glancingly, as Breadon had hoped, and planned for, and gambled on. They struck and bounced. The frail craft shivered and groaned in metal agony, jarred across harsh soil, bounced again, settled, nosed over and rocked to a stand-still. Somewhere forward something snapped with a shrill, high *ping!* of stress; somewhere aft was the metallic flap-clanging of broken gear trailing behind them. But they were safe.

Breath, held so long that he could not remember its inhalation, escaped Greg's lungs in a long sigh. "Nice work, Mr. Breadon!" he cried. "Oh, nice work!"

But surprisingly, savagely, Breadon turned on him.

"It would have been *better* work, Malcolm, if you'd kept your damned hands off the controls! Now see what you've done? Smashed up our skiff! Our only—"

"He didn't do it!" piped the shrill voice of Tommy O'Doul. "You done it yourself, Mr. Breadon. Your sleeve. It caught the switch."

"Quiet!" said Breadon, cheeks flushed, and reached out smartly, stilled the youngster's defense with a swift, ungentle slap. "And you, Malcolm—after this, do as you're told, and don't try to assume responsibilities too great for you. All right, everybody. Let's get out and see how bad the damage is."

Instinctively, Greg had surged a half step forward as Breadon silenced the cabin boy. Now old habit and common-sense halted him. He's overwrought, he reasoned. We're all excited and on edge. We've been to Bedlam. Our nerves are shot. In a little while we'll all be back to normal.

He said quietly, "Very well, Mr. Breadon." And he climbed from the broken skiff.

Hannigan said, "Looks bad, don't it?"

"Very," said Malcolm. He fingered a shard of loose metal flapping like a fin from the stem of the skiff. "Not hopeless, though. There should be an acetylene torch in the tool locker. With that—"

"You ought to of poked him," said Hannigan.

"What? Oh, you mean—?"

"Yeah. The kid was right, you know. He done it."

"His sleeve, you mean. Well, it was an accident," said Greg. "It could have happened to anyone. And he made a good landing. Considering everything. Anyhow—" Again he was Gregory Malcolm, serious-faced, efficient secretary, "Anyhow, we have been thrust into an extremely precarious circumstance. It would be silly to take umbrage at a man's nervous anger. We must have no quarreling, no bickering—"

"Umbrage!" snorted Sparks. "Bickering! They're big words. I ain't sure I know what they mean. I ain't exactly sure they mean *anything*." He glanced at Greg oddly. "You're a queer jasper, Malcolm. Back there on the ship, I figured you for a sort of a stuffed-shirt. Yes-man to the boss. And then in the show-down, you come through like a movie hero—for a little while. Then you let that Breadon guy give you the spur without a squawk—"

Malcolm adjusted his plasta-rimmed spectacles. He said, almost stubbornly, "Our situation is grave. There must be no bickering."

"Bickering your Aunt Jenny! What do you call that?"

Sparks jerked a contemptuous thumb toward the group from which they were separated. Upon disembarking, only Greg and Sparks had moved to make a careful examination of their damaged craft. The others, more or less under the direction of Breadon, were making gestures toward removing certain necessities from the skiff. Their efforts, slight and uncertain as they were, had already embroiled them in argument.

The gist of their argument, so far as Greg Malcolm could determine, was that everyone wanted "something" to be done, but no two could agree as to just what that something was, and no one seemed to have any bursting desire to participate in actual physical labor.

J. Foster Andrews, all traces of his former panic and confusion fled, was planted firmly, Napoleonically, some few yards from the open port of the life-skiff, barking impatient orders at little Tommy O'Doul who—as Greg watched—stumbled from the port bearing a huge armload of edibles.

'Tina, the maid, was in a frenzy of motion, trying to adminis-

ter to the complaints and demands of Mrs. Andrews (whose immaculate hair-do had suffered in the frenetic minutes of their flight) and Crystal Andrews (who knew perfectly well there were sweaters in the life-skiff) and Miss Maud (who wanted a can of prepared dog-food and a can-opener immediately, and look at poor Cuddles, momsy's 'ittle pet was so hungry)!

Bert Andrews was sulkily insisting that it was nonsense to leave the warmth and security of the skiff anyway, and he wished he had a drink, while the harassed, self-appointed commander of the refugee corps was shouting at whomever happened, at any given moment, to capture his divided and completely frantic attention. His orders were masterpieces of confusion, developing around one premise that the Castaway crew should immediately set up a camp. Where, how, or with what non-existent equipment, Breadon did not venture to say.

"You see what I mean?" demanded Sparks disgustedly.

Greg Malcolm saw. He also saw other things. That their landing-spot, while excellent for its purpose, was not by any manner of means an ideal campsite. It was a small, flat basin of sandy soil, rimmed by shallow mountains. His gaze sought these hills, looked approvingly on their greenness upon the multitude of dark pock-marks dotting them. These caves, were they not the habitations of potential enemies, might well become the sanctuaries of space-wrecked men.

He saw, also, a thin ribbon of silver sheering the face of the northern hills. His gaze, rising still skyward, saw other things—

He nodded. He knew, now, where they were. Or approximately. There was but one planet in the solar system which boasted such a phenomenon. The apparent distance of the Sun, judged by its diminished disc, argued his judgment to be correct. The fact that they had surged through an atmospheric belt for some length of time before finally meeting with disaster.

"Titan," he said. "Hyperion possibly. But probably Titan."

Sparks' gaze, following Greg's upward, contracted in an expression of dismay.

"Dirty cow! You mean that's where we are?"

"I believe so. There's Saturn, our mother planet, looming above us as large as a dinner plate. And the grav-drag here is almost Earth norm. Titan has a 3,000 mile diameter. That, combined with the Saturnian tractile constant, would give us a strong pull."

Sparks wailed, "But Titan! Great morning, Malcolm, nobody

ever comes to Titan! There ain't no mines here, no colonies, no —" He stopped suddenly, his eyes widening yet farther. "And, hey—this place is *dangerous*! There are—"

"I know it," said Greg swiftly, quietly. "Shut up, Sparks. No use telling the others. If they don't guess it themselves, what they don't know won't alarm them. We've got to do something, though. Get ourselves organized into a defensive community. That's the only way—"

Ralph Breadon's sharp, dictatorial voice interrupted him. "Well, Malcolm, stop soldiering and make yourself useful!"

And J. Foster, not to have his authority usurped, supplemented the order. "Yes, Malcolm, let's get going! No time for daydreaming, my man. We want action!"

Sparks said, "Maybe you'll get it now, fatty!" under his breath, and looked at Malcolm hopefully. But his companion merely nodded, moved forward toward the others, quietly obedient to the command.

"Yes, sir," he said.

Hannigan groaned and followed him.

III

Breadson said, "All right. Tommy, dump them here. I have a few words to say." He glanced about him pompously. "Now, folks, naturally we want to get away from here as soon as possible. Therefore I delegate you, Sparks, to immediately get a message off. An SOS to the nearest space cruiser."

Hannigan grinned. It was not a pleasant grin. He took his time answering. He spat thoughtfully on the ground before him, lifted his head. He said, "A message, huh?"

"That's what I said."

"And what'll I send it with?" drawled Sparks, "Tom-toms?"

Breadon flushed darkly.

"I believe the life-skiff was equipped with a radio? And theoretically you are a radio operator?"

"Finest radio money can buy!" interpolated J. Foster Andrews proudly. "Put a million credits into the *Carefree*. Best equipment throughout."

Sparks looked from one to another of them, grinned insolently. "You're both right. I *am* a radio operator, and there *was* a radio. But we crashed, remember? On account of some dope's sleeve got caught in the master switch—"

"That will do!" snapped Breadon angrily. He stared at the

bandy-legged little redhead. "You mean the radio was broken?"

"It wasn't helped none. The tubes was made out of glass, and glass don't bounce so good."

Greg Malcolm said thoughtfully, "Sparks, can't you fix it?"

"Well, mebbe. But not in five minutes. Maybe not in five years. I won't know till I get going on it."

Breadon frowned.

"I'll handle this, Malcolm," he crisped. Again to the radioman, "Well, you get to work on it immediately. And as soon as you get it fixed, send out an SOS advising the patrol where we are—"

"Speaking of which," insinuated Sparks, "where are we?"

Breadon glared at him wrathfully.

"Why—why on one of the satellites of Saturn, of course. Any fool can see that!"

"O.Q. But does any fool know which one? Or shall I tell you it's Titan? And when you know that, then what? Titan wasn't named that on account of it was a pimple. It's a big place. What'll I tell the Patrol? *SOS. Stranded in the middle of we-don't-know-where, somewhere on Titan, maybe.* They'll be hunting for us till we've got whiskers down to our knees."

Breadon's irate look vanished. He looked stricken. He said, "I—I don't know. We have a compass—"

Once again it was Gregory Malcolm who entered into the conversation. He had been toying, almost absentmindedly, with a funnel taken from the skiff's stores. Into this he had poured a small portion of water; his right forefinger was pressed to the bottom of the tube, closing it. He said, "I can answer part of that question now. Enough to cut the search in half, anyway. We're in the northern hemisphere of the satellite."

Maud Andrews looked at him sharply as if noticing him for the first time in her life.

"How," she asked, "did you know that, Malcolm?"

Greg said, "Watch this." He released his finger at the base of the funnel gently, carefully, taking care not to shake it. The captured water swirled and trickled through the opening. Greg said, "Notice the direction in which the water whirlpools? Clockwise. On the northern hemisphere of any normally revolving heavenly body, water released from a basin, funnel, container of any sort, swirls in that direction. In the southern hemisphere it swirls counter-clockwise. Maybe you've noticed in bathtubs, or—"

Breadon said impatiently, "Never mind the speeches, Malcolm. A very clever bit of reasoning—if it's true. Do you think you can figure out our exact latitude and longitude from that?"

Greg met his gaze levelly.

"Not from that," he said, "nor from anything else. Perhaps you've forgotten that latitude and longitude are artificial inventions of man's, based in one case on an imaginary 'equator,' and in the other on an arbitrarily appointed 'line,' like Greenwich.

"But I believe I can approximate our position and state it in such a way as to cut to a minimum the time of any search that might be made for us. That is, if a space patrol ever comes close enough to get within range of Sparks' radio."

"When," said Sparks, "and if I get it fixed."

"When," said Malcolm confidently, "you get it fixed."

Breadon gave in with as good grace as he could muster.

"Well, all right," he conceded grudgingly. "We'll let that rest for now. Meanwhile, it is apparent that we can't escape Titan—or wherever we are—immediately. That being the case, our first task will be to set up a camp. This is as good a spot as any. We'll stay right here by the ship. We'll use the ship to sleep in at nights—"

Greg coughed apologetically. "Mr. Breadon—"

"Well, what now? More funnels, Malcolm?"

"If you'll excuse me, sir—I don't believe it wise to make camp here. Nor to use the skiff for sleeping purposes."

"And why not, my man?" That was J. Foster.

"The conservation of what little fuel and power, we have, for one thing," said Greg. "Mr. Breadon's idea of using the skiff to sleep in was undoubtedly based on the plan of using the heating units. That we must not do. The time may come when we will need the skiff again, badly. We must save its fuel and electro-motors.

"And as for making camp here beside the ship—"

He hesitated. Crystal Andrews, her voice a trifle edged, as had been that of her father, prodded him for reply.

"Well?" she demanded. "Go on, Malcolm!"

"It wouldn't be safe, Miss. This is an exposed and vulnerable spot. Titan has—dangerous denizens." The words came reluctantly. "It would be much safer to take refuge in the hills. In one of those caves up there."

Crystal gasped, "Caves! Us—living in a cave! Ridiculous!" J. Foster echoed her words vehemently. Breadon laughed curtly; Mrs. Andrews made a gesture of repugnance with a slim, pale, exquisitely manicured hand. Bert Andrews snorted. Of the tycoon's family, only Maud Andrews showed any inclination to heed the secretary's suggestion. Her old eyes glinted shrewdly; her head made the ghost of a pleased nod.

* * *

But others more openly approved his plan. The maid, 'Tina, watching Malcolm with curious attentiveness, nodded and said, "That is wise. I have heard tales about Titan and its—its denizens." Tommy O'Doul grinned delightedly. He said, "Caves! Boy, caves! Old-time stuff, huh, Greg?" And Sparks Hannigan had said, "That's right, folks! And it's past noon now. Might as well get going right away so's we can get settled before dark. Right, Greg?"

And yet again there was the counterplay, the balance of Breadon's wealth, Breadon's name and Breadon's accustomed authority to the calm, sane logic of the slim young secretary. Breadon's curt laugh changed to something definitely antagonistic; his words sheered the muttering like a keen blade.

"Very interesting, Malcolm! But wholly impractical and completely absurd. We will remain here. And now—" He glanced at the high-riding sun. "And now I think we should eat before setting up our camp. Tommy, Hannigan—bring the electro-stove from the skiff. 'Tina, prepare lunch. We'll pursue a more intelligent discussion of our situation on full stomachs. Malcolm, bring cases from the skiff. We'll build a rough table out here in the open."

He scowled impatiently, authoritatively about the strangely silent group.

IV

At that moment, Gregory Malcolm realized what he must do. It was not a pleasant realization. Greg Malcolm was an easy-going, peaceful, placid man. The secretarial type. Sparks had called him a—what was it?—a "stuffed shirt." Never, save in rare moments of dreamful imagining, had Greg ventured to impress his opinions, his will, upon the desires of fellow men.

But he, of all those now surrounding him, seemed to understand, fully and completely, the crisis which now faced their refugee group. And he—it was made apparent to him by the pompousness of Foster Andrews, by the mulish petulance of Bert Andrews, by the aloof hauteur of Crystal and Mrs. Andrews, by the suicidal "orders" just given by Ralph Breadon—he alone was, in this moment of need, capable of deciding the destinies of the Earth-exiles.

J. Foster Andrews had the acumen and common-sense to lead them—but he had not the requisite knowledge. Breadon had the training, the space-experience—but he lacked solid horse-sense,

and his decisions were too strongly flavored by his own savor of self-importance. Yet, if they, ten humans, were to exist for a week . . . a month . . . a year . . . until help reached them, someone must command. And he, Gregory Malcolm, was the only one capable of taking into his hands the reins of rulership.

It was a knowledge at once heady, intoxicating and frightening. But—there it was! It had to be faced. And Greg moved, grimly but methodically, to the accomplishment of that which he deemed necessary. He halted the radioman with a gesture.

"Wait a minute, Sparks! Tommy, wait! 'Tina!" And he faced Breadon firmly. "We are not going to do that, Mr. Breadon," he said. "It would not be wise. We are not going to do it."

Breadon's brown features darkened with swift anger.

"What? What's this?"

And J. Foster Andrews waddled forward, puffing irate astonishment. "Here, here, Malcolm! What do you mean? This is—hrrumph!—blasted impertinence, sir! Insubordination!"

Malcolm held his ground, his pale cheeks oddly flushed.

"We are not going to do these things," he repeated slowly, definitely. "Breadon—" It did not occur to him that unconsciously he had abandoned the respectful, formal "Mr." which heretofore he had never omitted. "Breadon, your orders clearly indicate that you have not in any way grasped the full implications of our plight.

"I have already warned that we should not make needless use of our limited fuel and power reserves. Yet you've told Tommy to bring the electro-stove. I have hinted that there are dangerous antagonists on Titan, yet you wish boldly to tempt attack by cooking and eating here on this exposed plain in broad daylight. Common sense should advise you of the folly of eating what few food stores we hold in reserve, yet you calmly command the preparation of a full and wasteful meal."

He did not make mention of the other, perhaps irrelevant but nonetheless rankling detail. That never once had Breadon offered to help in these doings, nor had any member of the Andrews clan volunteered to assist; that the physical labor had arbitrarily been assigned to those of lesser caste—himself, Hannigan, young Tommy, 'Tina.

"Therefore," he continued doggedly, "I, for one, am refusing to obey your orders. I do so because I must. Call it 'insubordination' if you wish, Andrews—" The older man spluttered incoherently, mauve-jowled. "—but I would call it the 'will-to-exist.' The law of survival. I mean to survive on this unknown, hostile planet.

That can't be done if we squander resources as Breadon apparently means to."

A moment of tight silence answered his outburst. A slow, awkward movement stirred through the little group. It was, Greg sensed, a movement of alignment. He could sense, rather than see, the unconscious coalition of his sympathizers behind him; could see, without sensing, the outraged drawing-together of the Andrews husband and wife, *fille* and *fil*s, beside Breadon. One there was whose bright, intent eyes were clouded with uncertainty. Maud Andrews. Then, as if irresistibly drawn by the bonds of blood, she too looked to Breadon as her spokesman.

Breadon's voice was a thick flame of wrath.

"So that's the way it is, eh, Malcolm! Well, this had to come sooner or later. Might as well have it over with right now. Get the glasses off, my pale young friend! One leader is all we'll have around here!"

He stepped forward, bigger, browner, heavier than Malcolm. There was a rustle behind Greg; Sparks had stepped to his side, was pressing something into his hand.

"This'll make him behave, Greg."

"Put it away!" said Greg coldly. "Well have better use for firearms later on. I'll handle this the way Breadon wants." Slowly, painstakingly, he removed his plasta-rimmed glasses, slipped them in a lucite case, slid the case into a pocket, removed his trimly cut double-breasted business coat, handed it to the grumbling little redhead.

"But look—" growled Sparks. Then stopped. There was a newness about Greg Malcolm that stopped him. With the goggles removed, he thought dimly, Malcolm's eyes looked different. Less soft and meeky-mosey. They were like—sort of like chunks of grey flint. And Greg wasn't as skinny as he had looked, now that you saw him with his coat off. He was lean, yes—but there was a greyhound, whippiness to his leanness; a tight, spring-coiled sort of strength.

"Well?" said Greg. "You're ready, Breadon?"

Breadon's answer was a sudden, rushing charge. One of the women gasped; there came the whipping, splat of flesh striking flesh, then all noises muted save the sound of two men meeting in face-to-face conflict. Breadon's left jarred Greg back, his right swung wide and hard to put a swift end to the dispute—

But found no target. For leanly, deftly, with pantherlike swiftness, Greg was out from under the blow; his own left, probing

sharply, flicked once . . . twice . . . again into his antagonist's face, jarring Breadon, shocking, stunning him, halting his bull-like rush and jolting him back on his heels.

Maddened, Breadon whirled, seeking this will-o-the-wisp whose jabbing lefts stung like salt in an open wound. He growled something that was never completed, for knuckles bruised the word against his lips. Blood sprang, saline and hot in his mouth; the taste of it edged his rage to inchoate blindness, he flailed out recklessly, forgetful of anything he had previously known about fighting.

And that was his undoing. Against his bulky charge, Greg could do nothing but fight the kind of fleeting defensive battle he had learned in long hours at the gymnasium. A maddened warrior like this was a different matter, though; he was a vulnerable fighter.

Calmly and with infinite assurance, Greg stepped inside Breadon's swinging arms, beneath his faulty guard. His right hand came up once, sharply, to Breadon's jaw. The big man spluttered pink spray, lifted his arms. Again Greg lashed out with his left, this time to the belly; Breadon gasped and his mouth remained open, sagging.

Like the whipping length of a python, Malcolm threw that lean, deadly-sure right again—this time squarely to the other man's jaw at the spot where jawbone meets the ear. The blow cracked in the dull, astonished silence like the chunk of a heart-biting axe on timber. Breadon straightened slowly, numbly, in a meaningless reflex. The fire went out of his eyes; their brownness dulled like sun-faded velvet. Then he fell. As a tall building might fall. Crumpling . . . the knees folding first, the body sagging, the shoulders, the head helpless and rolling. In sections. He rolled once and lay still.

Sparks Hannigan said, "Gawddle-mighty!" His voice was feeble, awestruck. Greg Malcolm's fists, falling to his sides, uncoiled reluctantly. As if they had gripped the fiery baton of his anger, the battle-urge slipped from him with their unclenching. He drew a deep breath to steady his ragged breathing, nodded to the wide-eyed 'Tina.

"Take care of him," he said. "Water. He'll be all right in a minute." He faced the others, his manner an odd mixture of apology and aggressiveness. "Breadon said there could be but one in command," he said. "Let us hope that is definitely settled. For all time. And now I will ask all of you to help. Our first step will be to strip the skiff of the equipment we may need and carry it into the hills. In one of those caves we will make our headquarters."

But the fight was to have its aftermath. Crystal Andrews it was who burst from the little knot before him to kneel at her fiance's side, taking Breadon's head in her arms, glaring rage and hot defiance at Greg.

"With you?" she cried. "With *you*, you—cheap, upstart bully? Not in a million years! Ralph—Ralph, dear, are you all right? Did he hurt you?"

She jerked the water-soaked handkerchief from the maid's hands, pressed its coolness to Breadon's sand-bruised forehead. Breadon's eyes opened, dazed at first, then full of awareness, sultry, indignant, incredulous. He moved to get on his feet again. Greg stared at him coldly.

"Get up if you want to, Breadon. But don't get up fighting!"

Hannigan chuckled. "He ain't hurt much. Just his conceit. It's punched full of right and left hand wallops."

"That will do, Sparks!" snapped Greg. He looked at the others, replacing his glasses carefully, a vague sorrow in his eyes, defeat in his voice despite his victory. "You all feel that way? You still refuse—?"

Crystal Andrews' cried out, "Talk! Talk! Will you stop talking and go? Go to the hills if you want to. Leave us in peace. We don't want you and don't need you. Go to the hills—and good riddance to you!"

The tiny gimlet of hurt that lay somewhere deep inside of Greg twisted once more at her words, snapped, became suddenly cold and bitter. His jaw set. He nodded to Sparks.

"Very well. If that's your desire. Sparks, there are four of us, six of them. Take an inventory of all equipment and supplies in the skiff. We will take exactly four-tenths of everything . . . fuel, power units, food, wafer . . . everything. Get going. I'll help you directly."

Sparks said, "The radio?"

"We'll take that. You're the only one capable of repairing it. We'll save them in spite of themselves. If we can."

Sparks said, "Aye, sir! Come on, Tommy. 'Tina." He started toward the crashed skiff. Greg hesitated, feeling the desire to say something, to make one final plea, not knowing what to say or how to say it, restrained by the yet cold anger etched on his heart by Crystal's scorn. Then he too turned to help. A strident voice halted him.

"Just a moment, young man!"

"Yes, Miss Andrews?"

Maud Andrews, Cuddles firmly cradled to her ample bosom, left her brother's side and marched toward the life-skiff.

"Tell Sparks to make that a fifty-fifty division," she said. "There will be five of us in the hills."

Enid Andrews bleated faintly. Crystal, still kneeling, stared at her aunt incredulously. J. Foster Andrews vented his indignation in a sudden, blustering roar. "Maud! Don't be a blasted idiot! Come back here this minute!"

Maud Andrews continued to surge inexorably forward.

"I'm not," she grunted, "being an idiot! It's you who are, my dear, fat, dimwitted brother! I'm a selfish, pampered old fool, but I know common-sense when I hear it, and I know a man when I see one. Furthermore, silly as you may think it, I have a ridiculous desire to keep on living. I may have to *work* to do that, and I'm not overly fond of work, but if Mr. Malcolm will have me—?"

"Just plain 'Malcolm,' Miss Andrews," said Greg gravely, gratefully. "And I'm happy you see it my way."

"Tut! I'm not doing you a favor, Malcolm! I'm just looking out for myself, as I always do. Well, Sparks, don't stand there yawping like my thick-pated brother! What can I do to help?"

She waddled away. Greg glanced hopefully at those still waiting, immobile.

"Won't you—" he began, "Won't the rest of you—"

The eyes that met his were glacial. Bert Andrews, thick-lipped and bridling, snarled disdain. "The hell with you, Malcolm! The sooner you get out of here, the better!"

Greg said, "We'll let you know where to find us. If you should—should need us, just call."

"We won't need you." That was Crystal, coldly.

"I hope you won't," said Greg. "I sincerely hope you won't..."

V

Sparks Hannigan came out grinning. He said, "This one looks like the business, Greg. Plenty of room. Dry and warm. It's even got a natural flue-vent so's we can have a fireplace inside."

Greg nodded, pleased.

"Sounds good. I was beginning to think we'd never find a suitable cave. This one's within easy reach of that spring, too; that solves the fresh water problem. Well, we might as well get settled. Getting toward evening."

'Tina glanced at the sky, surprised. "So soon? I didn't know it had taken us so long. It seems as if only a few hours ago it was noon."

"It was," grinned Greg. "Titan's days are shorter than Earth's. Its diameter is only about 3,000 miles. By Earth measurements you'd say Titan had a sixteen hour day."

"And the 'day,'" grumbled Sparks, "ain't none too bright at that. On account of we're so far from the Sun."

"You haven't seen the worst of it. Right now we're on the Sun side of Saturn. We revolve about our primary once every 500-odd hours. Since Saturn is so large, when we are to the lee of it, it eclipses us entirely. So for about five days every Titan 'month' we suffer a complete blackout."

"And that—" Greg sobered. "That is another reason the others should dig into a good warm cave. It gets plenty cold during that eclipse period. An open camp on an exposed plain—" He shook his head.

Maud Andrews said, "I can't understand why this satellite is habitable at all. I was under the impression that Saturn is a frozen planet."

"It is. Its surface temperature is approximately 300° below zero, Fahrenheit. But the warmth of its numerous satellites is one of the astonishing discoveries made by the early space explorers, fifty or sixty years ago. Scientists have not yet explained the matter satisfactorily. Some say the tremendous mass of Saturn, the waves of atmospherics set up by its swirling motion and the 'grindstone' of its ring, form an electronic barrier-shield for the satellites. Still others believe that frigid Saturn acts as a gigantic mirror or solar reflector for its children."

"But Greg—" That was Tommy O'Doul. "Why ain't there any colonies here if the climate's O.Q.? Men live on Venus, where it's hot as billy-be-hanged, and on Uranus, which is nothing but a ball of ice, and on a bunch of cold, airless asteroids—"

"Economics, Tommy. The simple, single dictator of mankind's every venture. Venus has valuable vegetation, Uranus and the asteroids have important metals that can't be duplicated in Earth's laboratories, the asteroids have rare ore deposits. There is not—or at least there has not as yet been discovered—anything native to Titan that cannot be mined or made elsewhere more cheaply, more easily. Some day man's ever-expanding frontiers will claim this satellite as a colony, too. But now that the entire universe is open to man, the human race can increase a millionfold and *still* allow every soul more *lebensraum* than he can possibly use."

Sparks Hannigan gazed at him admiringly.

"It's stoo-pendous!" he said.

"Titan? Not any more so than—"

"Not Titan. You. You know everything, don't you? Pal—" Sparks shook his head. "I sure had you figured wrong. I thought you was a soft-soaping dope. So then you got us off the *Carefree* onto the skiff, cooled Breadon like a herring, declared yourself *It* and made us like it—"

Greg said, "Nonsense! I just happened to—Oh, nonsense! Shall we go into our new home?" But he flushed.

By evening—Titan's short, grey shadowed evening, the only logical unit of duration by which they could live so long as they remained captive here—their new cave home began to take on some semblance of lived-in-ness.

Vegetation was abundant on the hillsides. Sparks and Tommy had gathered heaps of dry faggots while Greg built a crude stone fire place underneath the flue-vent Sparks had reported; shortly thereafter the women had a cheerful blaze crackling on the hearth, and mingled with its grateful warmth was the odor of a savory stew, welcome scent to the nostrils of five who had worked long and hard in gathering the vegetables that had gone into that potage.

"Eat nothing," Greg had warned, "and dig nothing that does not show signs of having been eaten, dug or picked by wild animals. Later we can make chemical analysis of dubious foods to determine their edibility. For the present, we will depend on the most certain test, the acceptance by other flesh-and-blood creatures."

He had also permitted that a single can of bouillon concentrate be used in the stew. "For flavoring. There is so little food in reserve that we must save it against the cold, dark days when we can't get out to gather supplies. Later on we'll have fresh meat."

He looked thoughtfully at Cuddles, sniffing, yapping excitedly by the fireplace, and Maud Andrews, with a swift, maternal gesture, swept the poodle into her arms and glared at him beligerently.

"Oh, no you don't! You'll eat *me* first!"

"I wasn't thinking of that," said Greg indignantly. "I had something else in mind. A poodle, eh? Hmmm!"

'Tina and young Tommy came into the cave, arms full of fresh and fragrant ferns which they dumped beside a wall. Greg, glancing at them, could not curb his astonishment at the overwhelmingly sudden change that had come over 'Tina. During the *Carefree's* cruise, during the years he had worked for old J. Foster, he had seen the girl a thousand times—but never, he discovered

now, really *seen* her before! Always she had been a dim, dusty figure in the background. A foil for the spoiled, immaculate perfection of Enid Andrews, the glittering, heart-stopping beauty of Crystal.

Now, viewed as a woman and a comrade, he was aware that she was lovely herself. Slim as a rush, and yielding-strong as that same wild water-flower; dark-eyed; hair as the Martian midnight with live lights glinting in it, too, as the stars glinted over the Martian deserts; soft, white hands, graceful but capable—

But here! he thought, what nonsense was this? He had work to do. And this was no time for weaving poetic cadences about a girl who was practically a total stranger!

Now she laughed, gaily, her very laughter seeming to burst from a heart happy with newfound freedom. And she said, "It was just as you said, Greg. We found the ferns down by the spring. Did we bring enough of them?"

Greg said, "Enough for tonight. They'll make comfortable beds. Later on Sparks and I will build real beds for all of us. Thank goodness there was a tool-chest on the skiff. You folks ready to eat?"

Hannigan lifted his nose from the fireplace.

"Ready! *I* been ready for a half hour, and my stummick's been ready for a week!"

And somehow it didn't seem at all surprising to Greg that Maud Andrews should be the one who, sleeves rolled up, face flushed with hearth-heat, warmth and good fellowship, seized the ladle, beat on the side of the pot vigorously and bawled, in what was far from a wealthy socialite's cultured tone, "Come and get it! Come and get it!"

So, somehow, the first day was over . . . and the second day, too . . . and a week of Titan's sixteen hour days slid past so quickly that Greg could not truly say where they had disappeared.

Duties, chores, at first chaotic became matters of mere routine as one or another of the little band took them on his own shoulders. Maud Andrews, who on the second day bluntly and surprisingly startled everyone with the *pronunciamiento* that henceforth there would be, "—no more of this 'Miss Andrews' stuff; call me 'Aunt Maud'; I'm old enough to have mothered every last one of you!", set herself up as cook, thus freeing 'Tina to take care of the multitude of other household—or cave-hold—duties. And an excellent cook she turned out to be, performing miracles with the odd, variegated samples of produce brought to

her by the rest of the group.

Her once-aroused suspicion flared again when Greg casually requested, one day, permission to take Cuddles for a little run in the woods. She clucked to her pet, turned him over to Greg, but watchfully.

"I don't know what you have in mind, Greg Malcolm. But if you come back here with any sinister looking pieces of meat and no Cuddles—"

"I'm hoping to come back," confessed Greg, "with both meat *and* Cuddles. He's a poodle, isn't he? Well, he's always been a lap-dog to you, but I have an idea maybe his heritage will overcome his habits when I get him out into the woods. The poodle, in its earliest beginnings, used to be a hunting dog, you know. It was bred and trained especially for that purpose. Of course his nose may have been ruined by being pampered, but—"

"My Cuddles," exclaimed Aunt Maud, "a hunting dog!" She looked horrified.

Greg said slyly, "I hope so. He wouldn't be the first member of this party to prove his true worth beneath a thin veneer of civilization."

Aunt Maud's cheeks were red, but it might have been the warmth of the fire. And maybe the wood-smoke made her eyes shine like that, too. She pushed Greg roughly.

"Oh, run along!" she ordered. "But mind you bring him back unchanged!"

"Okay, Auntie," Greg said.

Greg brought him back, but not unchanged. For the poodle had, amazingly, reverted to type, once set on the trail of wild game. Greg carried back to the dinner table two small creatures, one vaguely resembling a squirrel, one definitely allied to the rabbit family, plunked them proudly before his companions.

"Don't give me credit. It was the pup. He's a humdinger. You should have seen him tree that squirrel—or whatever it is! And that rabbit-thing—he went scrambling halfway down a warren after it! Didn't you, Slewfoot?"

The dog yerped happily. Aunt Maud moaned.

"Slewfoot! Oh, my gracious! Cuddles, come here to momsy-womsy wight away! Did nassy-mans call him—"

Cuddles made no move to obey. Greg whistled, and the dog looked up. "Okay, Slewfoot. Go to momma!" And the dog pranced over to Aunt Maud. Greg grinned. "I think he likes his new name better," he said.

Slewfoot yerped again in an ecstasy of approval.

* * *

And so, gradually, life became easier and smoother and happier for the quintet of cave-dwellers. Beds took the place of piled ferns. The woodpile towered toward the cove roof against the days of dark and cold which, according to Greg's computations, might be expected within the next week or so. Food was varied and plentiful, and a needed food was supplied when Tommy O'Doul marched triumphantly home with a bawling kid in his arms.

Sparks glared at him.

"Hey, youngster, what did you tote that home for? We ain't got no room for pets. And that thing ain't ripe to be et yet."

Tommy said, "I had to bring it. It was the only way I could make its mom follow me. See?"

And sure enough, a few yards away, anxiously eying its captive offspring, was a mother goat. Or something like a goat, anyway. Sparks caught on them. A flying tackle and the camp had corraled its first head of livestock. And from then on there was milk.

And there were songs in the evening, card games, stories and compensations for the long, hard tasks of the daytime. Sparks labored on his radio set, though without too much hope. "Smashed to hell and gone, Greg. The tubes is the wust part. I could jockey the wires around. But glass—"

Greg looked thoughtful. "I wonder," he said. "I wonder? Well—do what you can with the metallic parts."

So they waited and worked, and in some dim corner of their minds continued to hope for the release which all in some vague fashion expected might come "someday." And their camaraderie was great and wholesome, but there was a single subject they never mentioned. The other quintet on the plain below. From their hillside eyrie they could see the other camp, but by common consent they made no effort to approach Breadon's followers. They had offered assistance and it had been refused. They could do nothing more, now, unless—

The unless came sooner than they expected. In the still of the night it came in the dark, multi-mooned Saturnian night, when Greg and his comrades were all asleep in their bunks.

Greg woke with a strained feeling that he could not at first identify. He only knew, as a newly awakened sleeper dimly knows, that something was amiss.

Then, as he listened, he heard it again. The sound of a firing rifle. And the thin, muted whisper of a cry from the clearing below. A voice lifted in dismay.

With a start he was on his feet.

“Sparks?”

Hannigan bounced from his blankets like a redheaded ball of rubber. He was on his feet, scrubbing his eyes with the backs of his hands, even before he knew he was awake.

“Smatta? Whuzzup, Greg? Smatta?”

“Below!” roared Greg. “The party in the valley—they’re in trouble of some kind! Get your gun and come on!”

VI

The others were awake now. Young Tommy was aquake with excitement. He made a headlong dash for the dry niche wherein were stored the arms of the cave-dwellers, came back dragging three rifles, handed one to Greg and another to Hannigan.

“Let’s get going, Greg!” he yelped. “Golly Moses, what do you think it is? Animals, maybe? Or people? Gosh, let’s get going!”

Greg took the spare rifle from him firmly.

“We’ll go; *you* stay.” Then, in swift contrition as the lad’s face fell measurable inches. “Someone must guard the cave while we’re gone, Tommy. ’Tina, build up the fire and put a kettle on. Aunt Maud—”

The old woman nodded grimly.

“I know. We’ll have hot water ready. And bandages if you need ’em. Run along!”

How they ever got down that mountainside so quickly was ever afterward a mystery to Greg. It was not exactly a painless descent; their progress was a series of runs, falls and buttock-bruising slides. The footing, in broad daylight, was precarious at best; with only sallow Saturn and the aura of the Rings to illumine their way, it is a wonder they ever reached the plain in a single piece.

To add to their frenetic haste, in their ears there rang the constant challenge of gunfire. Crimson flashes lit the flatsward below, once a whining slug, miserably aimed, made both of them duck instinctively as it shrilled somewhere over their heads, *spanged!* against a rock behind them, and went ricochetting off into the darkness.

For now they were on level ground, and mingled with the rattle of arms there was another sound, the purling whimper of tongueless, inhuman things astir and hungry. Greg had once heard, on Earth, the furtive night-passage of a jackal tribe; the soft, half plaintive mewlings, the incessant scrape of scrabbling paws, the

ammoniac stench of unwashed bodies. He thought of this now, sharply, as he heard these mutterings, smelled these rank odors, strained his eyes to determine contours in the darkling night.

Hannigan complained, "You see 'em, Greg? It's dark as a whale's gut. I can't see nothing. What'll we fire at? Are our folks out in the open or in the skiff? We might hit *them* if—"

Greg said, "We'll know in a minute." As they moved forward he tugged from his belt the weapon he had been holding in reserve; the one such weapon found amongst the stores of the life-skiff; one he dared use but infrequently because once its charge was exhausted he had no way of replenishing it. "We should be near enough now. Spot 'em quick and fire while there's light!"

He jerked the trigger of the Haemholst flame pistol. A writhing streamer of ochre speared from its muzzle, lighting the plain with a hot and eerie effulgence. Like a fiery dart it blazed into the heart of the pack surrounding the life-skiff. By its lingering gleam Greg saw, with stomach-churning repulsion, the creatures which attacked.

Neither men nor wolves were they, but a cruel parody on each. Lean, hair-matted beast-things running on four legs, semi-human of feature but with loose lips snarling back from yellow fangs; fingered paws long-clawed; indescribably evil and filthy; the more inhuman because they embodied so many physical attributes of Man.

Their pack must have numbered three score, ranging from gray-pelted old ones to skinny, ragged pups. Apparently they had surprised the plateau party in the open, allowing them no time to remove their precious campstuffs, because the ground about, around and before the skiff was littered with a refuse of clothing, blankets, supplies and equipment, cases and scraps of food.

It was for this last that the wolf-men had attacked, because even as the ochre beam found their midst, they were scrambling hungrily about the campsite, avidly gobbling all edible scraps they could nose out. A few more aggressive ones scented richer victuals; these it was who, despite the sporadic fire from within the skiff, snuffled, clawed and clamored at the port.

Until the heat-beam struck them. That put an end to their hunger and their blood-lust. Like any wild woodland animal, they had no fear of firearms; they had no experience with them. Bullets that struck, killed; wolf-men untouched by bullets had no way of associating hurt with a sharp burst of sound and a strange, unfamiliar powder-scent.

But light—light that burned the hair and scorched the flesh; light that spared not one of them, but spread to dose all with its heatful pain—that was something different! As the beam struck and spread, snuffings changed to bestial screams of fear and pain. Those nearest the beam's focal point felt no pain; they died instantly, charred hulks that crisped and sank, shapeless, to the ground. And from these strangely altered, swiftly dead companions the others fled, howling in shrill alarm. Their footsteps were the dry patter of leaves on shale; they broke and ran wildly for the nether hills, tonguing shrill ululations of hurt.

Then the door of the skiff opened cautiously; dim light was a sliver, a crack, an oblong. And the voice of J. Foster Andrews quavered through the darkness to their ears. It sounded shrill and afraid. "Malcolm—is that you?"

Sparks snorted derisively. "Ain't that awful?" he demanded. "Is that you!" He raised his voice. "Hell, no, it ain't him! It's the Gray Lensman. Who'd you think?"

"Shut up, Sparks!" Greg said, "Hold your fire, the wolf-things are gone. We're coming in!"

A few moments later, he and Hannigan were standing within the life-skiff.

Gregory Malcolm was twenty-six years old. For more than eight years he had been training himself to undergo any and all emotions without change of expression. That was, in his opinion, a prime requisite for a man whose vocation lay in a subordinate position. Now he was grateful for learning that self-control, and hoped his features were as granitelike as he tried to make them. He hoped his eyes did not mirror the astonishment, the shock, the numb dismay he felt when he first glanced about the interior of that cabin, and at those who stood before him.

It was incredible that in one short week—one very short Titanian week—so great a change could have been wrought in this haughty quintet. *His* followers were weathering the storm of catastrophe without faltering, without any relaxation of civilized standards. But Breadon's—

He studied them, his quietude concealing the sudden heartsickness he knew, his spectacles hiding the swift light of horror in his eyes. The men had not shaved, it was clear, since their crash-landing. Five day stubble lay frostily on the jowls of J. Foster Andrews, blackly on the cheeks of his son and son-in-law to-be.

Nor did slovenliness end there. Beneath the beard-growth, the skin of the men looked dirty, dingy, sallow, as if they had not

washed for days. Their clothes were equally soiled and sorry. Greg saw that J. Foster's nails were dull and broken and grubby as the nails of a stevedore.

He rallied himself with an effort. These were men. They had been working hard, laboring. They could not stay immaculate. They had been in a fight.

Then he looked at the women, and knew that he made excuses vainly. It was even more disillusioning to see what had happened to Mrs. Andrews and Crystal in so short a time.

Enid Andrews, fashion-plate of two continents, one of Earth's smartest-dressed women, thrice-named by fashion authorities as Best Dressed Woman in the Solar Confederation, hobbled sloppily about on scuffed slippers, the heel of one of which had broken off and not been replaced, so that her posture sagged like a bag of meal, split at a side-seam and sifting awkwardly away. Her once elaborate coiffure was a bird's-nest of tangled braids which hung unbraided, curls that sagged limply; hastily adjusted pins and combs clung insecurely to locks that, once pearl-silver, were now day-crusted gray.

Crystal—glamorous, pulse-stirring Crystal—was in no better plight. Her gorgeous ash-gold hair was pulled severely back from a forehead which, Greg discovered, was not nearly so broad and smooth and high as he had imagined; the artificial color had rubbed from her cheeks, leaving them lustreless and sullen; her lips—ever rich, ripe, full—were pale and harsh-thin and her mouth had tight, argumentative lines at the corners. Her eyes were dark-rimmed, weary, haggard. She was, thought Greg with shocked comprehension, a tired girl.

They were all tired. Tired and beaten and dejected. All but Breadon who, even now, was eyeing Greg defiantly, as if challenging him to comment on their condition. He said, bitterly, "Thank you, Malcolm. It was a most magnanimous gesture, coming down from your hilltop castle to rescue us."

Greg said nothing. He was looking about the interior of the cabin, noticing with incredulous disfavor the way it had been abused, littered, left uncleaned. Ashes, dirty dishes, scraps of cloth and paper, fragments of cartons and dirt tracked in from outside . . .

But Hannigan was not bound by Greg's compunctions. He spoke his mind frankly, staring at the five skiff-dwellers with obvious contempt in his eyes.

"If you'd ask me," he said, "it's damn near time somebody

come down and rescued you. Not from wolves, neither. From yourselves. You all look like you'd been drug through the butt end of a wringer."

"Well, we have," began Bert Andrews savagely. "We have been through—"

"Shut up, you fool!" Breadon cut short his plaint viciously; blustered defiance that was in itself an apology. "We've been busy making a camp around here. We haven't had time to—"

Sparks drawled, "Bud, we been busy making a camp, too, in a place which wasn't already equipped with furnishings, like your'n. And I think we done a better job of it. And in between times, we found time to shave and bathe once in a while."

Andrews flushed and said stiffly, "There is a need of being provident with water. Our supply is limited—"

Greg said, "What? You mean you've been using the water reserve from the life-skiff?"

Enid Andrews answered. Excitedly. Volubly. Almost at the point of tears. She wrung her hands, and Greg could not help noticing the anomaly of those at once dirty and gem-bedecked fingers.

"We have. Oh, we have. There's no other water anywhere around here. Nor food. We've been living on concentrates . . . sickening, horrible stuff . . ."

"That's not true!" flamed Breadon. "We did have other food. I made bread. I caught small game. I put out traps. There would have been plenty of food except for the wolf-men who raided tonight. They broke our stove . . . stole my reserves . . ."

"Which," mocked Sparks, "you conveniently left out for them to sniff and come a-running after? Why don't you call it a day, Breadon? Admit you're nothing but a cocky Earthlubber at heart and—"

"Why, you little whippersnapper!" Breadon took a swift step forward. But Greg had heard enough. He laid a restraining hand on the socialite's arm. His voice was as soothing, as pleading, as he could make it.

"Haven't we had enough of that already? Look here, Breadon, let's let bygones be bygones. We've had our little quarrel, now let's act like sane and sensible humans.

"You're not situated here any too well. You've admitted you're not near a water supply. The terrain is open to attack, as is proven by tonight's incident. You've been, well—let's say 'unlucky.'

"On the other hand—we've been lucky. We've got a nice, warm cave large enough to house all ten of us easily. We have soft beds and good food and fresh milk; safety and good fellowship.

With some of the things you have in here—those upholstered chairs, for instance; what remains of your equipment and supplies, we could make a veritable paradise of our cave.

“So what do you say? Let’s cast in our lots together. Make it one big, happy family?”

J. Foster looked at him thoughtfully. Enid Andrews began to cry softly. Crystal glanced at Ralph, then at Greg, than at Breadon again. Bert Andrews stroked his chin. He said, “It sounds good—”

Breadon interrupted.

“There’s just one thing, Malcolm,” he said curtly. “We’ll accept your—your overtures of friendship on one condition. That you’ll step down from the high horse you’ve been riding lately, come to the realization that you’re not cock-o’-the-walk around these parts.”

Greg said gravely, “If you mean that our community shall be a society in which all share and share alike, I am in complete agreement with you.”

“That’s what I mean,” said Breadon. “Of course, we all recognize that there must be leadership. As our oldest man, our most important member, Mr. Andrews is that logical leader. I can assure you, acting as his lieutenant—”

“No!” said Sparks loudly. “It’s the same old thing in a different package, Greg. He wants to be boss, else he won’t play. The answer is—comets to you, Breadon. We’re doing all right the way we are; you’re making a mess of your affairs. As far as I’m concerned, you can stay here and stew in your own gravy!”

He turned toward the door. Greg said, “Wait, Sparks. I’ll be right with you.” And he, too, nodded at Breadon. “I fear Sparks is right, Breadon. You haven’t learned your lesson yet. We’re going back where we belong. We’re glad to have been of some small service to you. If you ever need us again, just call. Meanwhile, my offer remains open. If you should ever decide to join us on *our* terms—”

A loud and cheerful voice interrupted him. A voice from outside, bellowing gay greeting, “Ahoy, you in there! Open the door!”

Sparks said, “Aunt Maud! What’s she—?” and pulled the door open. In the oblong, against the slow gray dawn now crawling above the hilltops, stood Aunt Maud, a huge grin on her face, a tremendous bowl in her stalwart arms. From the bowl rose a tantalizing aroma. She waddled in, plunked it on the nearest desk.

“Thought you folks might be sort of hungry after a scrap,” she grinned, “Watched it from the cave. Nice, cozy place to watch a

fight from. Saw morning was coming on, so I brought you down some breakfast.

"Sister—" She glanced at the sallow-cheeked Enid shrewdly. "You look sort of peaked. You too, Crystal. You look older, honey. Well, Greg—ready? We'd better be running along. 'Tina's got our breakfast almost ready. Fruit juice and porridge and pancakes with butter and sugar-syrup. Sounds good, eh? Well, bye, folks!"

And by main force she herded the two men swiftly out of the skiff. Outside, moving toward the hill. Sparks turned on her pettishly.

"Now, what did you go and do that for, Aunt Maud—you've gummed up everything! Greg was telling 'em off; just beginning to make 'em listen to reason—"

Aunt Maud grinned and winked broadly at Greg.

"Sparks, are all radiomen as dumb as you, or do you hold the championship? Greg could talk from now to doomsday and not get anywhere with that outfit. I *know*. They're my own haughty, independent, pigheaded flesh and blood.

"But that stew I brought them—" She chuckled and rolled her eyes delightedly. "Now, that's a *real* argument. The best their bellies ever listened to. Just wait and see!"

VII

The truth of her statement was exhibited very soon. That very afternoon, in fact. The dim Titanian sun was settling toward the westward hilltops, and Greg was just putting the finishing touches to a crude grist-mill he was rigging for the women, when there came the scrape of hesitant footsteps up the rocky pathway.

Hannigan had been away since breakfast time, making a survey of the natural resources within easy distance of their cave. Greg thought it was the radioman returning.

"Hi!" he shouted over his shoulder, without looking back. "Any luck? What did you find?" Then, as no voluble, profane, fantastic answer was forthcoming, he turned around. His eyes momentarily betrayed his astonishment. "Oh! Hello, Andrews!" he said.

Bert Andrews shuffled uncomfortably. His gaze held a curious mixture of wistfulness, reluctance and expectancy. He said, in a voice that was a trifle too breathlessly nonchalant, "Hello, Malcolm. Just taking a little stroll, so I thought I might drop up and see—see how you're making out." He glanced about him,

obviously impressed. "Not so bad," he said. "Not bad at all! That's the cave, I suppose? See you have things pretty well straightened out. What's that?"

Greg's gaze followed his nod to the crosswork which was suspended directly above the cave-mouth; a latticework of steel, firmly wire-lashed, secured by a rope, the stretch of which dipped into the cave itself.

"Barrier-shield," explained Greg. "Hangs on a pulley. We can drop it from inside. In case of attack, you see. Slides down that groove into the channel cut in the ground, holds tight there." He grunted. "That's one of the reasons we don't have any honest-to-John furniture in our home. We had too many other important uses for the metal."

"Clever," said Andrews. "Ingenious. I—er—got to thinking over what you said this morning, Malcolm, after you left. You were right. For a group of civilized people we let ourselves get into sorry shape."

He rubbed his chin reflectively. Greg noticed for the first time that his face was no longer dark with beard; that though his clothes were still dirty, he had made an effort to straighten them, dust them. The skin of his face, though, was pink and sore; chafed.

Greg said, "What in the world did you shave with, Bert? A cross-cut saw?"

Andrews said defensively, "The electric razor won't work. The dry-cells are exhausted, and we can't use D.C. without wasting fuel. There wasn't a honed blade aboard the skiff. I used my pocket-knife. It—" he confessed ruefully, "It wasn't very sharp."

Greg said, "Hannigan mounted carborundum sheets on a lathe wheel and put edges on a couple steak knives for us. I'll let you have one before you go back. Hey, there he is now! What's the story, Sparks?"

Hannigan came into the clearing at a trot. He was excited. He said, "Sweet Christmas cow, Greg, you know what I run across? A—What's this? Company?"

The eager, interested look fled from Bert Andrews' eyes. He said stiffly, "I—I guess I'll be running along now, Malcolm. See you again."

He turned, his shoulders very stiff. Too stiff to be convincing. Greg glanced at him appraisingly, motioned the radioman to keep his mouth shut, called after the young Andrews.

"Don't go yet, Bert. We're just getting ready for dinner."

"Dinner?" The young man spun like a top. Then he recalled his dignity. "Oh—dinner! Why, I guess ours is almost ready, too. 'Bye—"

"We'd be glad to have you stay," said Greg levelly, striving to keep the amusement out of his voice. "I think there's a roast tonight. Something that looks like a young suckling pig can't exactly tell, though, till we taste it. These Titanian animals are different. Then there's a salad and potatoes and beans, a fruit compote, and I think 'Tina baked a pie today."

Andrew's eyes widened as his lips twitched. "I—I wouldn't want to be any trouble," he said faintly.

"No trouble at all," said Greg. Then, unable longer to restrain himself, "But of course if you think they'll be expecting you—?"

"No, I'll stay!" blurted Andrews hastily. "Thanks. I can wash up somewhere?"

"Inside. Ask Aunt Maud for soap. She's the custodian of that." Then, as the young man disappeared into the cave hurriedly, Greg grinned at Hannigan. "One!" he said.

"You want to hear about what I seen?" demanded the redhead. "Listen, it was Terrific! Great big marsh, full of the damndest life-forms and craziest vegetation anybody ever met up with. Hot, too! Steamy, like the Grand Marshes of Venus, only not quite as stinking—"

He stopped, annoyed. "One what? You ain't listening to a word I'm saying. Don't you want to hear?"

"Later, Sparks," said Greg. "Right now I'm wondering how long it will take the others to fall in line."

It didn't take long. The citadel of stubbornness had been undermined the night of the attack. It toppled with Bert Andrews' "friendly visit"—from which, some time later, he staggered home glassy-eyed with an overdose of wild roast, hot vegetables, crisp greens and luscious fruits, succulent berry pie—and it crashed, violently, the next day.

Bert Andrews brought his dad up the hill, presumably to confer with Malcolm on a future mutual defensive system; the two of them lingered for lunch—and after lunch old J. Foster, with the blunt directness which accounted for his success in Earth's business world, sat back, grunted comfortably, and said, "That's the first meal I've enjoyed since I was a pup in Service! Malcolm, you win! I'm sick and tired of this squabbling, and of our hand-to-mouth existence down there. Is there room for me in this cave of yours?"

It was no moment for gloating triumph. Greg said, "Yes, sir."

"Then I'm moving in. And so is my wife. What do you want me to do?"

Greg said, "Hannigan and I were planning to break ground for a small farm this afternoon, but this is more important. We'll go down with you and help you move up your personal things. How about—" he hesitated briefly "—how about Crystal? And Breadon?"

"I don't know," said J. Foster unhappily. "But if they're smart, they'll quit kicking against the pricks, too."

They were smart. When Andrews and his son, accompanied by Hannigan, Tommy and Greg, appeared at the skiff to move the Andrews' property; when Andrews told them bluntly that he and Enid and Bert were casting their lot in with the cave-dwellers, there was a moment of sultry silence, fraught with reluctance, anger, recrimination—then Breadon bowed to the inevitable. Not with good grace, but with grudging agreement he said, "Very well. If that's the way you want it, Mr. Andrews. If we're welcome up there, Malcolm—?"

Greg said, "You are welcome, Breadon. I told you that a week ago." And promptly forgot Breadon and Breadon's surliness as he realized that Crystal, too, had been shamed into a recollection of her feminine duty to herself. Somewhere she had found cosmetics, and somehow she had managed to clean and press out a fawn-colored desert sun-suit. Once again, ash-blond hair combed back to a shoulder-length veil of shimmering loveliness, pale golden skin fresh and creamy and fragrant beneath the sheer silk of her abbreviated costume, she was the glamorous, crystal-lovely Crystal of more leisured days. A woman at once lovely, challenging and—desirable.

Thus the nation divided against itself was united. And thus began the second phase of the refugees' struggle to exist against staggering odds on the lonely, hostile moon of Saturn.

VIII

Amazingly, the period of readjustment was not long, nor was it arduous. It was accomplished briefly, surely, in a series of emphatic object lessons. There was Enid Andrews, for instance. On her first afternoon in the cave she called 'Tina to her side, ordered the beautification of her face, her hair, her nails, and with a sigh of relief surrendered to the ministrations of the younger girl.

Greg, witness to this, frowned. But he motioned for silence when Aunt Maud would have made some irate comment.

That evening, by former agreement, Enid washed the dinner dishes. When 'Tina stepped forward to dry them, Greg stopped her.

"Sit down, 'Tina. Mrs. Andrews will dry them."

Enid started, gasped, stared at the huge pile appalled. 'Tina said, "But there are so many of them, Greg. Ten of us—"

"You have done extra work today," said Greg suavely, "to earn your rest. Mrs. Andrews is in your debt. She must work out her obligation. We have," he continued pointedly, "no servants or masters here. Courtesies must be repaid in kind."

Only twice more did the lessons have to be repeated; once when Bert Andrews gluttonously devoured an entire berry pie and was made to spend the next lunch-hour picking fruit for another; again when Breadon carelessly fouled the spring by washing in it, and in penance was required to construct a clay-and-stone dam below the spring, that in the future the community might have adequate bathing facilities; after that everyone understood that he had his allotted share of work, that the work must be done, that meals, warmth, comfort and safety could be earned only by sweat and toil.

And gradually the rude cave dwelling began to take on the semblance of a home. During the short days at their disposal before Titan, pursuing its cosmic rounds, plunged into the umbra of its gigantic mother planet, every member of the refugee corps worked feverishly to prepare and fortify for the dark days to come.

It was well that they did so, for when the darkness descended, ensued a bleakness even more terrifying than Greg had anticipated. The eclipse of Titan by its parent was no mild, momentary phenomenon like the eclipsing of Earth by Luna; it was a five day cessation of all heat and light.

With the darkness came sweeping, icy winds, gales monstrously violent, and incredible cold. From a sky black and terrible came the snow, five inches of it in an hour, eight feet of it in a day. It was alarming at first. Then Greg and all of them realized that the very ferocity of the storm was their salvation! Were there to be this frightful cold *without* snow, not all the fires of Gehenna, not all the clothing and blankets in the universe, could have protected them. But the snow, dropping like a sodden, white blanket, choked and filled the mouth of their cave, piled thicker and thicker, enswaddling them in a fleecy comfort that kept out the bone-britling blasts.

Then they thanked the foresight that had led them to build up a roof-touching fuel reserve, a store of fresh produce and game,

for they could not leave their refuge. They were snowbound until Titan left the shadow of Saturn and the warmth should again melt their prison walls.

But those days were not days of idleness; they were days of accomplishment. The women, under 'Tina's guidance, ripped apart unneeded goods salvaged from the skiff's stores—tarpaulins, extra bedding and napery, carpeting, drapes—and restitched them into more needed, more practical articles of wearing and household apparel.

Breadon and Greg, laying aside a mutely-acknowledged hostility, pooled their knowledge and ingenuity in an effort to ascertain their whereabouts on the satellite. Neither had studied mathematics closely, a fact each now bewailed. But they had a few books on astrogation, taken from the skiff, and they had determination and intelligence. Utilizing some of their precious, dwindling store of forged metal, they constructed a crude but—they believed—reasonably accurate sextant with which, when the darkness was gone, they hoped to take celestial readings that would aid their computations.

In the making of this, Greg was forced to sacrifice something that had been for almost ten years as much a part of him as his arms and legs. His spectacles. Strangely, he did not miss them much after the first day. Their purpose had been mainly to protect him from eyestrain and headaches in a confined vocation that required much reading. But here on Saturn's satellite, health improved by hard labor, Greg had experienced no headaches. He was, in fact, almost disgustingly healthy. He could tell by the straining of his clothes at throat and chest and waistband that he was gaining weight; his appetite had improved and when night came, he did not have to read himself to sleep.

Young Tommy took upon himself the task of chronicling their exile. His method, though extravagantly romantic as befitted his years and enthusiasm for this adventure, was nonetheless efficient. He laboriously scraped smooth a wide portion of the cave-wall; on this he inscribed a calendar, a log, and a map of such portions of the satellite as they had so far explored.

Meanwhile, Sparks Hannigan fretted over his damaged radio set. An accomplished bug-pounder, he took little time to get the wiring rearranged. The replacement of metal parts was a tougher problem, but it, too, he solved with the aid of their acetylene torch.

One final job, however, stopped him cold. He shook his head when he spoke of it to Malcolm.

"The tubes, Greg. It just ain't no use. We can't operate the radio less'n we got tubes, and ours is gone. I guess I'm just wasting my time."

Greg said, "Isn't there a type of radio that works without tubes? Operates on a crystal, or something?"

Sparks said, "Yeah. But it ain't got no power. We got to get a message plumb off the satellite, out into space where it can be picked up by a Space Patrol cruiser. Or the Saturn lightship."

"And that's impossible? Suppose you had glass?"

"Can you make it?" scoffed Sparks.

"Maybe," said Greg. "Glass was accidentally discovered in the first place, you know, by Phoenician sailors who built a fire on a sandy beach wherein was imbedded raw chunks of natron. We might be able to do the same."

Sparks shook his head glumly. "O.Q. So that gives us glass. We still got to blow it, and figger out some way of sucking the air out, and winding filaments. Oh, understand, I ain't saying we can't *do* it, Greg. But it'll take years."

Greg nodded soberly.

"Well, we'll overlook no bets. Sparks—tell you what to do. You go ahead and build one of those simple "crystal" sets, just in the event that someday a scout ship or exploration plane should come within our range. Andrews is an important man, you know. Earth won't dismiss him casually as 'Lost in Space.' We'll also, as soon as the Sun comes back, clear a wide swath in the plain below us and construct a huge SOS sign of wood and underbrush that will be visible by day and can be set afire by night.

"Then, if we should ever hear the signal of a scout ship, we'll hope they see our marker."

"If!" grunted Sparks.

"What's that?"

"Skip it!" said Hannigan. "I was just making book against myself."

So Greg maintained an optimism before the others, an optimism he did not entirely feel himself. Always he talked of the day they would leave Titan, but sometimes he wondered if that day would ever come.

And truth to tell, there were periods when he almost hoped that day would not ever come! For here, a thousand million miles from the Earth that had borne him, Gregory Malcolm had finally come into the rulership that, on Earth, he could never win, but that here was his by right of greater strength and knowledge.

He gazed about him, musing, and saw a cavern bright with

candles that *he* had taught the womenfolk to render from the fats of wild beasts, warm with a flame *he* had kindled and nurtured, comfortable with furnishings *he* had constructed to their purpose. He saw nine men and women, a half dozen of whom had been his "superiors" aforetime, but who now looked to him for guidance, protection and leadership.

His mind's eye pierced the rock walls of the cavern and gazed, marveling, at the cosmos as viewed from desolate Titan. When these snows melted he could stand upon the hillside beneath the flaming moons of Saturn, beneath the never-ending wonder of Saturn's massive, multi-colored Rings, and say with Defoe's ancient castaway that here he, indeed, was monarch of all he surveyed.

This was his ordained fate; this was his brave, new world; these people were his subjects. And he was, for howsoever brief or long a time, an Emperor. And the white, the whirling stars—these were his empire!

Perhaps he was not the only one of that group who saw this truth. For there was more than mere grudging lip-service in the changed attitude of Andrews and his wife and son. Bert Andrews was a changed boy. His wilfulness had vanished; his allegiance to Greg was ardent. Maud Andrews' affection for Greg was an obvious thing. She saw to it that he was first fed, first clothed, first taken care of in all things; hers was an attitude of fierce maternalism, springing from a breast that had never known motherhood.

And—and there was another strange thing, too. A thing of singing glory that Greg could scarce believe, even though its truth was exhibited to him in a thousand little ways.

Crystal Andrews!

A great change had come upon Crystal Andrews since the loss of the *Carefree*. Of the old Crystal, only one part remained. Her blindingly radiant beauty. Her selfishness, her coldness, had fled, had been banished as her accustomed languidness had been banished by the obligation of labor.

Daily her attitude toward Greg grew more intimate. From aloofness she melted into acceptance, acceptance faded and became approval. Approval waxed as transpiring events proved time and again Greg's wisdom and his right to rule; there came upon the girl an eagerness to be the first to do whatever he suggested.

This was good, and as it should be. But there was something else, too; something deeper. At first Greg could not understand it, then gradually its meaning became clear even to his wholly-masculine mind. The sudden glance . . . the lingering touch of

hand against hand as they chanced to pass one another . . . the host of unnecessary little questions that brought them into contact a dozen times a day . . . the sweeping flush when he, looking up unexpectedly, met her gaze. All these and other things. The lithe, sure, free, but overwhelmingly feminine allure of her body, shoulder brushing his as they sat before the fireplace in the long evenings. The slow caress of her voice when she spoke his name. The moment of swift alarm—a torpid snake that had somehow wriggled into the cavern, toward the warmth of the fire—and Crystal in his arms for all too short a moment. And drawing away reluctantly when the “danger” was past.

He should have known from these things. Or from the amused glances of Sparks Hannigan, or the increased surliness of Ralph Breadon, or from the sudden loss of gaiety on the part of 'Tina.

“What’s the matter with you, 'Tina? Don’t you feel well lately?”

Her eyes avoiding his. “I’m all right, Greg. It’s nothing.”

“But you don’t sing any more. You’re sure you’re well? There’s nothing I can do for you?”

“No.” Her voice low. “No, thank you.”

“But I want you to be happy. Look, 'Tina—let’s you and me play cribbage tonight like we used to? We haven’t had a game for weeks. How about it?”

“Oh, Greg—would you like to? Really?”

Her dullness slipping away from her like a dropped cape; her voice throbbingly eager. Then another voice at his elbow, a throaty, heart-stirring voice. “Oh, Greg—me, too? May I play? Will you teach me the game?”

Greg turned, smiling. “Why, of course. We’ll get Sparks and make it a four-handed game. Eh, 'Tina?”

But 'Tina drew back, her eyes hurt again and distant. Her voice faint. “N-no, Greg. You and Crystal. I don’t think I want to . . .”

Which Greg could not understand. But gradually, out of his confusion and miscomprehension, one truth came clear. And with its coming there was a sudden singing in his heart, a fire in his veins. He loved Crystal Andrews. And Crystal Andrews loved him!

Then one day they woke to find the floor of the cave glistening darkly with a pool of water. The snow was melting from the mouth of the cave. When they attacked the weakened snowbank with shovels and brooms, laughing and fighting their way clear of

the white barrier, they discovered that the dark days had ended, that once again the sky of Titan was silver-blue and bright, that already the warmth had turned the snow mantle to chuckling rivulets that ran merrily down the hills, leaving fresh green in its wake. The miracle of Titan's "winter" had passed, and the land would again be theirs for three warm weeks.

Greg's brain was afire with a hundred projects. A viaduct to carry water into the cavern during the next cold period. They had had to depend on melted snow this time. A study of the stars with their new sextant. The clearing of ground for the gigantic signal. He turned to the others enthusiastically.

"We've got to work now, folks, as we never worked before! Tommy, I want you to get right to work on that new viaduct we were talking about. Andrews, your first job will be to replenish the wood supply. Try the west woods, that's the best timber. 'Tina, see what these short 'winters' do to the vegetation, will you? I don't imagine they're dead. Nature has ways of counteracting its own excesses. I believe we'll find the vegetation here on Titan is phenomenally hardy. But see, anyway.

"Aunt Maud—you and Enid set out those traps we made during the dark spell. We'll have a hot stew tonight. Breadon, suppose you and Sparks and I go down to the plain and start planning our signal system? Crystal—"

Crystal was at his side, her hand on his arm. "I'm going with you, Greg."

"What? But they need you—Oh, all right!"

He smiled. Behind him Aunt Maud snorted and disguised the snort with a rattling cough. 'Tina looked at him oddly for a moment before she turned obediently toward where last week there had been a vegetable patch. Her eyes were hurt. Greg could not understand why.

It was not until he was halfway down the hill that he remembered he had promised to let her help with the sign project. Of course it was too late to do anything about it then. Besides, Crystal's feet were unsteady on the melting path. She needed his arm about her for support. And her hair had a tantalizing fragrance all its own.

IX

It took all of the men, working steadily from dawn to dusk every day, two full weeks to construct the signal. When it was done, Greg looking down upon it from their hilltop eyrie, gazed upon it with approval and found it good.

Across the mile-wide flatness of the plain they had heaped huge piles of branches, faggots, brush, forming the letters "SOS." Green, they stood out boldly; withered and faded, their brownness would be equally clear.

Hannigan was pleased with his share of the work, too.

"—wire," he finished, "from the bottom of the 'S' to the cave. We just about had enough, too. Anyhow, if the ship should happen to come at night instead of in the daytime, all we got to do is push the switch, and a spark'll jump in the tinder. Send the whole signal up in flame in less time than you can say 'integral calculus.'" He frowned. "If," he added, "a ship comes at all. Which of course I couldn't say yes or no."

"It will come," said Greg absently. He said it because it was the thing to say; as a matter of habit. He was not even thinking of his words. He was thinking, now that this project had been accomplished, of other things. Of a silo that must be built. They had nine head of livestock now, due to Tommy O'Doul's persistence. The beasts would have to be provided with winter quarters. One goat in the cave had not been so bad, last month. But nine goats—Perhaps, he thought, that small cave next to ours. If we could dig into it through the west wall . . . make a small opening . . .

His lack of concentration brought a false conclusion from the third man in the group. Ralph Breadon stirred restively.

"You should say," he insinuated, "if Malcolm *wants* a ship to come!"

The words penetated Greg's thoughts of the future slowly. He turned a blank, questioning look on the other.

"Eh?"

"I merely said," repeated Breadon, "that one could not condemn a man in your position for showing lack of enthusiasm in a rescue party."

Greg stared at him thoughtfully.

"Just what do you mean by that, Breadon?"

Breadon shrugged.

"Isn't it fairly obvious? Two short months ago you were a nobody. A secretary without background, position or authority. Today you're the demigod of Titan. Sir Boss. I don't complain; I merely comment. You have everything a man could ask for. Authority . . . security . . . a woman . . ."

The last jolted Malcolm out of his apathy. He took a swift step forward, gripped Breadon's lapels with a fist grown heavier, rougher, with labor.

"If you mean Crystal, Breadon—"

Breadon stood his ground. "Let go of me, Malcolm. I'm not going to fight you again. Of course I mean Crystal, It's perfectly obvious that you and she—Oh, hell, man! Don't be a hypocrite! After all, when people live as intimately as we do, in one little cave . . .

Greg felt dark anger welling up within him like a gall-tinctured flood. Rage not that Breadon should say this thing, but that there should be cause for his thinking it. He choked, thickly, "Damn you, Breadon—there's not a thing wrong between Crystal and me. I love her, yes. And Crystal loves me. We've only been waiting till this big job was finished—"

"Then if I were you," retorted Breadon wearily, "I wouldn't wait any longer. Or is it another case of the king being incapable of doing wrong? Anyhow, I think you understand what I mean now. Two months ago a marriage between you and Crystal Andrews would have been ridiculous. Today—"

He shrugged again. Greg glared at him wrathfully, impotently, for a long moment. Then he spun on his heel, led the way down the hill to the cave. Sparks scurried along behind him anxiously. "Now, look, Greg— don't do nothing you might regret—"

"Shut up! I'll handle this!"

At the cave he called all the settlers before him. They came from their tasks, surprised, wondering. He wasted no time. He broached the subject boldly.

"Because we ten are marooned here on a desert satellite," he said savagely, "without a clergyman, there is no reason we must abandon all the rights and privileges of civilized society. Human emotions have a habit of enduring. I think it is no secret that Crystal Andrews and I have fallen in love. I intend, therefore, to marry her as soon as it can be arranged.

"Crystal—" He turned to the girl. "Do I speak for you as well as for myself?"

The girl nodded and stepped forward into the circle of his arm. "You know you do, Greg."

J. Foster Andrews looked pleased. He said, "That's fine, son. But who's going to do the marrying?"

"You are. As owner of the *Carefree*, you were also its commander. I think the space code would permit your acting in capacity of justice." Greg's anger melted. "I'm not being very formal about this, sir. Perhaps I should ask for your permission".

"You have it, my boy! And now—" Archly. "When will the—"

hrrumph!—happy event take place?”

Greg looked at Crystal questioningly. “Next week?” she said, “I’ll have to have a little time, Greg.”

“That’s it, then,” said Greg. “Next week. When the dark period comes.”

The little group broke up, then. One by one they murmured words of congratulation and approval to their leader and his bride-to-be and drifted away. Finally Crystal went back into the cave, and Greg was left alone with ’Tina, who alone of all the group, had so far said nothing. He went to her.

“You haven’t told me you’re happy, ’Tina.”

She turned slowly.

“Shall I say so, Greg?”

“I want you to. Why do you act so strangely toward me, ’Tina? Do you dislike me? You used to—”

“I’m happy,” she cried suddenly. “Now I’ve said it. You want me to. Are you satisfied? Why don’t you let me alone, Greg? Must I like or dislike you? You have one woman! Must you—” She broke from his side, raced forward to the edge of the hill, stared blindly down into the plain. Greg moved after her, worried. “What is it, ’Tina? You’re *not* happy! Are you lonely? Why don’t you get married, too? Sparks . . . or Breadon . . .”

He stopped, his gaze over her shoulder settling on something in the valley beneath. A thing incredible to behold, but that was . . . yes, *was* . . .

“’Tina!” he gasped.

At the tone of his voice she spun swiftly, anxiously. “What is it, Greg?”

“Look! Down there! A—a human!”

X

“More gruel, Marberry?” asked Aunt Maud solicitously. “Can you eat another spoonful?” She glared at those who ringed the reclining spaceman belligerently. “Why don’t you let him alone?” she demanded. “Greg Malcolm, I thought you had better sense! The man’s weak and sick!”

Marberry’s eyes were like charred pockets, but he summoned a weak smile.

“I’m all right,” he said. “There isn’t much more to tell. We managed to cut free from the *Carefree* just before she crashed. Four of us. Lipstead, Hawkins, Craeburn and myself. Our skiff

cracked up in a mountain gorge. Craeburn was killed, and Lipstead broke his leg. But we fixed it up in splints, and he got by.

"When the snow came—" He shut his eyes momentarily, as though to rid them of a persistently evil vision. "When the snow came we almost died. We ran short on fuel, and the skiff leaked. Then the electro-stove ran down, and we had to eat cold, canned food.

"Even so, we pulled through. But when it got warm again, Hawkins said we mustn't spend another winter in the skiff. We had to find a cave in the mountains, he said. So we abandoned the ship and started moving. It was then that they caught us."

Breadon, who had entered late, asked, "Who?"

"Natives of Titan," Greg capitulated briefly. "He described 'em to us before you came in. Savages. Cannibals. Humanoid, but no culture. Funny physical make-up, like the Uranians. Don't feel the cold at all. Murdering devils. From what he says, we're lucky they haven't found us before this."

Breadon said, "Cannibals!" and looked sallow. The supine man continued weakly.

"We had to leave Lipstead behind. He couldn't run. He drew a gun on us, threatened to kill us all if we didn't leave him. We heard his gun afterward. He must have got a half dozen of them before—before they got him.

"Then Hawkins and me split up. It was the only way, he said. One of us might be lucky. I—I guess I was. They followed him instead of me. And all the time—" His voice raised feverishly. "And all the time, we was only about ten miles from here! If we'd only known—"

Aunt Maud would stand for no more. She bustled between the invalid and his listeners, shooed them away angrily. "Run along, now. This man needs sleep and quiet. Go 'way!"

But later, as Marberry slept the sleep of exhaustion, Greg called a council of war.

"Ten miles," he said soberly. "If those creatures are only ten miles from here, we can expect an attack almost any day. Or moment. From now on, we must keep a watch at all times. No one must leave the cave alone."

Hannigan said, "You reckon they'll find us, Greg? Titan's a big hunk of dirt."

"They're savages. Savages can follow the faintest trails of wild animals, let alone the spoor of a frightened, sick man. They'll be here."

Hannigan said, "There's one good hunk of news in the whole sorry mess. Marberry said him and his companions sent out radio SOS calls for three solid weeks. Till their radio run dry. Maybe somebody picked up one of them calls. Maybe there's help on the way right now."

"Radio. Speaking of radio, Sparks, how about that crystal receiving set you were working on? Is it finished?"

Sparks smiled sourly.

"Finished your sainted sandals! It's all washed up. Listen to this!"

He stepped to the hodge-podge of wires and coils on which he had been laboring, adjusted it. From its diaphragm came dismal sounds. Squawks, squeals, quavering vibrations.

"Static," said Breadon.

"Double it," gloomed Hannigan, "and add a thousand. The worst kind of static. An electrical disturbance field."

Greg frowned. "But that can't be, Sparks. There's no electricity around here. No generating plants or—"

"It can't be," snorted Sparks, "but it is. I don't know what makes it act thataway. Maybe it's the H-layer of this cockeyed satellite. Sun spots, maybe. Whatever it is, it sure gums up my machine." He stared at the tiny set helplessly.

Greg stirred himself.

"Well, then we'll have to look forward to fighting this battle without hope of assistance. Andrews, I want you and Tommy to inspect the cave-mouth barrier immediately, see that it's in perfect shape and reinforce it. Ralph, you and Sparks drive the livestock into the small cave so they'll be hidden, 'Tina, the fuel reserve?"

"Complete, Greg."

"Good! I'm going out to stand the first watch. If you need me, I'll be—"

At that moment a small figure, bristle-haired with excitement, came scampering into the cave.

"Greg!" cried Tommy O'Doul. "Greg—they're down there! On the plain. I seen them. And I—I think they seen me, too! They're heading up this way!"

A half hour later, Greg, flanked by a tight-jawed little band of compatriots, crouched in the bottle-mouth of an altered cavern.

The short time that had elapsed since Tommy O'Doul gave the alarm had been minutes of swift preparation. What little of water, food and supplies could be brought into the cave had been hustled in by eager hands. The stock had been herded into the small, adjoining cave, and boulders had been rolled against the cave

mouth. The metal grill had been dropped before the mouth of their own cave; it was behind this they now crouched, through this that Greg looked out upon a lead-gray sky and green hills.

"There's one thing," said Greg. "One break in our favor. It's starting to get darker, and it's barely afternoon. We must be dipping into the penumbra of Saturn. In a little while the darkness should come, and the gales and the cold."

Hannigan said, "That ain't no break for us. Marberry said they didn't feel heat and cold."

"I know. But they can't prevent the snow falling. If it comes down like it did during the last dark spell, we will have an eight-foot fall of ice between us and our attackers."

Andrews looked at the sky anxiously.

"But until it snows, Greg?"

"We fight!" said Greg grimly.

Bert Andrews, who had wriggled forward on his belly to the furthestmost ell of the bottle-neck, ducked back hastily, twisted his head over his shoulder.

"Then we fight now!" he rasped. "Here they come!"

It was then that the Earth-exiles saw, for the first time, the dominant race of Saturn's sixth satellite. To see was to marvel that Nature had once again—as on Earth, Mars, Uranus and Io—selected the bipedal humanoid form in creating a ruling race. Except for the thick, downy pelts that covered these Titanian's bodies, the low, slanting, bestial foreheads, the depth of breast and rapacious mouth slits, these creatures were the counterparts of man.

But there were other unapparent differences, thought Greg. Marberry had reported the Titanians impervious to heat and cold, which argued a difference in normal body temperature and perhaps a difference in basic metabolism. There must be sharp differences between man's mentality and that of these man-like beasts, as well, else they would not come seeking their interplanetary guests as the huntsman seeks his quarry.

A long, questing, silver-pelted line, they climbed the hillside path to the flat clearing before the cave. They paused there, peering about them suspiciously, nostrils wide and eyes searching. Greg realized, suddenly, that these man-things were far down humanity's scale; so much of the animal was in them that they placed more dependence in their olfactory than in their visual sense. They seemed to catch the man scent, the spoor they had been following. Their leader moved forward to the grillwork. Hannigan's shoulder brushed that of Greg as he wriggled forward.

"Now, Greg? Shall we let 'em have it?"

Greg whispered hurriedly, "When I give the word, all fire at once. Remember, we have very little ammunition. We must make every shot count. Ready?"

He glanced at his all-too-tiny fighting crew. Bert Andrews, old J. Foster, Breadon, Sparks, himself. "Tommy," he ordered, "go back into the cave!"

"Aw!" said Tommy—but obeyed. Greg glanced about him once more. Others of the Titanians had slunk to their leader's side now. Their voices, guttural and monosyllabic, carried plainly over the few intervening yards.

"Now!" cried Greg.

Five rifles spoke as one. Their conjoined thunder beat deafeningly upon the sweating cavern walls, echoed and re-echoed, ripping at Greg's eardrums. But another sound pierced the roar of gunfire. The shrill, pain-laden screams of stricken man-things. The inquisitive leader fell without ever knowing the cause of his death. A Titanian behind him opened his slit-mouth in a flat, high scream, turned to run, tearing at his gaping chest with claws that crimsoned as he tore. He took three steps, toppled, crashed. Another body was beneath his own; still another fell upon his.

Old J. Foster's lips were white. He turned to Greg, sickened and trembling.

"We can't do this, Greg! It's slaughter!"

A weak voice cackled derision. "Don't feel sorry for 'em. If they get in here, they'll show you what a real slaughter looks like. Malcolm, have you got a gun for me?"

It was the sailor, Marberry. Greg said, "Go back and rest a while longer, Marberry. We have no more guns."

"I'll get Tommy's."

"Rest. This siege may last all day, all night or for a week. You'll get your turn."

Marberry disappeared. Greg said, "Fire! Keep on firing! They're bewildered. Maybe they'll break and run."

Again the salvo of gunfire rocked the corridor, and again foremost figures slumped to the ground, slicing the ranks of the attackers. But now, peering through the grill, Greg saw that he had underestimated the manpower of the attackers. They were not a dozen or two dozen . . . there were a hundred of them milling, now, in the small clearing, and the path was still clogged with the silvery bodies of others lumbering to the attack.

What happened in the next hour was such stuff as nightmares are made of. At first, Greg cautioned himself each time he pulled

the trigger of his rifle that he must make his shot count; later he fell into a dull, scarce-comprehending state of mono-existence wherein he was conscious only of the nerveless and repeated movements of his hands. Load . . . aim . . . fire! Load again . . . aim . . . fire . . . load . . .

And at first there was little need for aiming. For the Titanians, savagely prodigal of life, knew only one way of fighting—to press forward in brute force, attempting to crush down the metal grill that stood between them and their vengeance. To fire into that thick press of bodies was sure havoc. The Titanians were weaponless save for the cudgels they whirled about their heads threateningly; nor could they break down the barrier so long as the succeeding hands of all who gripped it became the limp, impotent hands of the dead.

Then at last even their dim, animal intelligence saw that this was a losing battle. A cry rose and was shuttled from mouth to mouth. The silvery figures, now gray in ever-gathering dusk, wisped away from the cave-mouth.

“Licked ’em!” cried Hannigan. “They’re running, by Peter! Golly, Greg! Look at that pile out there!”

There was awe in his voice, distaste in Greg’s eyes as he looked on the motionless mound heaped before the cave. But Greg said, “Don’t get rash! They may be planning a new attack. Breadon—what’s wrong with you, man?”

Ralph Breadon grinned wryly.

“Fortune’s favored child, that’s me! They didn’t have any weapons to shoot me with, so I shot myself. Bounced a bullet off the grill. It came back and pinked my arm.”

“Go get it dressed. There it comes!” cried Greg.

“The new attack?” Sparks whirled.

“The darkness. And the snow!”

He was right. The threatened period of darkness had descended at last. Once again Titan was within the shadow of its primary. And once again the vast winds were keening from the hilltops, the great flakes of snow were tumbling from a lifeless sky. Greg’s voice was exultant.

“Now we’re safe! In an hour or so we’ll be behind a fortress of ice. And I don’t think they’ll lay siege to us in a blizzard for a solid week.”

His triumph was short-lived. For even as he anticipated victory, disaster beat on the portals of their refuge. From the depths of the cave came a shrill scream, the shout of Marberry, and Tommy’s frantic cry—

“Greg! Come a-running! They’ve found the back entrance!”

* * *

The back entrance! Greg's heart lurched. He cursed himself, suddenly, for having tried to accomplish too much in making their cavern habitable. For by so doing, he had rendered them vulnerable in a spot where would be no barrier of ice an hour hence.

The back entrance. The archway they had broken out between their large cave and the smaller one wherein Tommy's livestock was herded. Somehow the Titanians had found the other cave, rolled away the boulders, and were now attempting to get at their quarry from the rear.

Greg shouted, "Andrews, you stand guard here! One man will be enough. The rest of you—come on!"

The first of the Titanians was pushing through the cleft just as he reached the main chamber. There was a look of unholy glee on the manlike creature's thin lips as he attained the cave. But it died there, suddenly, frostily. It was not Greg who dropped him. It was young Tommy, staggering under the recoil of a rifle almost as tall as himself, firing pointblank, bouncing back to reload manfully, bawling with youthful glee, "Got him, Greg!"

Then there was no time for speech, because the Titanians were pouring through the breach in a howling, flame-eyed mob. For a moment Greg, even as he fought, felt despair touch his heart with leaden fingers. There was no grill here to bar the enemy's passage; the cleft was wide enough to admit three at a time. He and his companions were outnumbered ten, twenty to one.

But he did not, could not, take into consideration two vital facts. The first was the indomitable gallantry of his fellow exiles. He had expected that, in defense of their lives, their possessions, their women, the armed men would fight to the last breath. And they did. Pressing forward on relentless feet, Breadon, Andrews, Bert, Hannigan. But Greg had not realized that the women, too, could fight. As in a smoke-veiled dream he caught glimpses of their activities. Aunt Maud and 'Tina, armed with huge ladles, dipping their weapons into a massive pot of boiling water, flinging the scalding liquid at the cold-impervious but heat-sensitive invaders. Crystal, no longer a serene and radiant beauty, but a flaming Volkyr whose ash-blond hair tumbled about her, forgotten, gaining a vantage point at the very lip of the opening, slashing ferociously at the attackers with a monstrous cleaver. Enid Andrews racing to the wall, digging in Greg's duffle, pressing something into his hands.

"Your flame-pistol, Gregory!"

Greg grasped it eagerly. "Stand back, Crystal!"

She turned, and saw, and fled. And the ochre flame mushroomed into the heart of the still-charging Titanians. Their charge stilled, faltered, wavered, died. The stench of charred bodies was nauseous. Then there were screams of fear—and the Titanians were in rout!

Into the small cave they pursued them; from it but a handful of the silver-pelted savages escaped. And when the last living invader had disappeared, Greg turned to his exhausted followers with a smile of weary triumph.

"We'll see no more of them," he promised. "Already the snow is a foot deep. By morning both caves will be completely walled in. And I think we've taught them to fear us. What, 'Tina?"

For she was standing before him; her eyes were cool and positive . . . there was decision in her tone.

"I thought it was all over for us a moment ago," she said. "And I knew, then, Greg, that it was a mistake for me to die without having told you. I promised myself that if a miracle occurred . . . and we should live . . . I would tell you."

He said wonderingly, "But what, 'Tina? I don't—"

"I know you don't, Greg. That is why I must say it. I love you. Have loved you since that first day." Her eyes were grave. Greg's were embarrassed.

He said, "But you—you shouldn't say such things, 'Tina. Crystal—"

"She is a brave woman, Greg. But she is not your woman. She is his."

His gaze followed 'Tina's across the room, to where Crystal knelt beside the injured Breadon. She was cleansing his wound, which was as it should be. But there was a softness, a tenderness, to her motions . . . and a look in her eyes. Greg looked away, suddenly aware that even from the beginning he had felt this barrier between them. Perhaps Crystal had loved him, for a while and in a fashion. But she loved him for his strength, his power, his ability to rule. She was a woman of the ruling class; ever her conscious trend would be toward allegiance with those who led. But in the showdown . . . when instinct overcame logic . . .

Hannigan cried across the chamber, "What, Greg?"

"I didn't say anything," said Greg gruffly.

"But you did. I heard you say—*Omi-gawd!*" Sparks made a sudden leap toward the bench on which rested the forgotten crystal set. "It's this! *Listen!*"

Static still boiled through the speaker of the tiny set. But now, above the static, riding its vibrations, was superimposed the sound of a human voice. And the voice was calling, over and over again,

"Space Patrol Cruiser Orestes . . . calling survivors of the Care-free. We are looking for you. Where are you . . . where are you? Come in, Carefree survivors. Space Patrol Cruiser Orestes . . . calling survivors . . ."

Greg looked at 'Tina. Then once again at Crystal, whose face, upturned with sudden, speechless joy, was the radiant vision of unattainable perfection. Then at Sparks, whose gaze met his reluctantly. He said, "Sparks—press the plunger."

Hannigan's hand moved slowly toward the control that would set into flame the gigantic brush-signal on the plain below. With strange reluctance, everything considered. For certainly Sparks realized as plainly as he, Greg, that the snow was falling with increasing rapidity, that the cruiser must be almost directly overhead for its signal to penetrate the raucous interference of static, that if this opportunity were lost it might be years and years before . . .

Sparks voice was low in his ears.

"Are you sure, Greg?"

And suddenly there was deathly silence in the cave. Never until that moment had Gregory Malcolm realized how completely was he the ruler of this tiny clan. Here, where all life and the future of life and the future of these men and women were concerned, the last great judgment was relegated to him.

He looked about him uncertainly. And what he read in his comrade's eyes surprised him. For there was reluctance in the eyes of Bert Andrews . . . a vague regret in those of old J. Foster Andrews . . . hope and pleading in those of the girl 'Tina . . . frank disapproval in those of the woman they knew as 'Aunt Maud.' Only the eyes of Crystal Andrews, who were he to let the cruiser pass might be his wife, was there mirrored fear and apprehension . . .

He shook himself. And with that small gesture he shrugged from his shoulders an ermine that had lain there all too briefly. Quietly he said the words that stripped him of his sceptre, that swept away his empire of the stars.

"Press it, Sparks!" he said.

"A remarkably ingenious device, sir," said Captain Allengrove approvingly. "And you made use of it in the nick of time. We were

just about to abandon the search when the snowy waste beneath us blossomed suddenly with that signal. I'm sorry we couldn't get here sooner, sir. But—" And he glanced about the cavern appreciatively. "But you appear to have had matters under control."

J. Foster Andrews said, "Well—er—Captain, as a matter of fact, it wasn't—hrrumph!—altogether my doing. Greg, here—"

Captain Allengrove dismissed Malcolm with a glance.

"Yes, yes, I quite understand. One couldn't expect you to take care of all the minor details. But I must say, Mr. Andrews, you are a fortunate man. Inasmuch as you established residence on Titan, the Federation will be forced to acknowledge your priority claim to the heretofore unknown ore deposit near your cave."

"The—er—ore deposit?" Andrews looked blank.

Sparks hollered, "Oh, my sainted tonsils! The swamp! Of course! Pitchblende! That's why there was so much static interference! Radium!"

The cruiser's commander frowned on him.

"Exactly. Of course, Mr. Andrews, you cannot file a full claim to the property. That requires a full year's residence. And a man as important as yourself—"

Greg Malcolm started. He had said nothing up till now. He had been given an opportunity to say nothing. The captain had addressed himself solely to the one "important" man in their party, the man for whom, primarily, the search had been made, the man to whose "genius" was attributed the existence of "the cast-aways."

Now he spoke up. He said, "But *I* am establishing residence, Captain Allengrove."

Allengrove permitted himself the luxury of a small smile.

"You, Malcolm? But really, my dear fellow, only a spaceman could undertake such a task. A *secretary*—"

Aunt Maud waddled forward belligerently. She said, "Secretary—pah! Fiddle-faddle, Captain! You don't know what you're talking about! And as for you, Brother Jonathan, I'm ashamed of you! Taking credit for all this—arragh!" She turned to Greg. "Gregory, I'm an old woman, and perhaps I'm an old fool, as well. But I've had more fun and excitement in the past month than I've had in the previous forty years. Be—be *darned* if I'll go back to Earth and piddle away my remaining years at operas and pink teas. I'm staying here with you!"

Enid Andrews, into whose shoulders had so quickly come the grace and ease of authority that was her charm, looked shocked. "Maud!" she exclaimed.

Sparks Hannigan breathed a sigh of relief. "Then that makes three of us," he said. "Any more takers?"

Tommy O'Doul pushed his way to Greg's side. "Can I stay, too, Greg? Can I, huh? Me, too?"

Greg said gratefully, "If you want to, Tommy. But, Bert—you?"

For Bert Andrews had also aligned himself with his aunt and Sparks. Now he said defiantly, "What Aunt Maud says is good enough for me. I'll stick!"

Tina was already beside Greg; her gaze was fiercely loyal. She did not need to say anything. Captain Allengrove looked stunned. "But really," he said, "but really, this is most unusual! I mean, we were sent to rescue you! I—er—I don't quite see how you expect to survive without leadership—"

Aunt Maud snorted belligerently. "Leadership! You just leave us supplies and we'll have all the leadership we need! Marberry, you're staying, aren't you? Well, that's seven of us. A lucky number! I don't suppose there are any more?"

She glared at Crystal. Greg, too, was watching the girl. Now before the steadfastness of their combined gazes, her eyes dropped. Her cheeks colored faintly. But she did not move from Breadon's side. She said, "I—I'm sorry. I hope you understand, Greg."

Greg said, "I understand."

"Furthermore," declared Aunt Maud staunchly, "I'm warning you, Jonathan! I know you! If you go home bragging about your part in the colonization of Titan, I'll follow you, so help me! And if you fail to keep us equipped with supplies—"

J. Foster said hurriedly, "Now, Maud!"

Captain Allengrove looked at them all uncomprehendingly. It didn't make sense. But he was a Space Officer—it was not his place to engage in family quarrels; his duty was to rescue what few of this astonishing crew wished to be rescued. He coughed nervously. He said, "Well, Mr. Andrews—if you're ready now?"

"Yes," said J. Foster. "We're ready now. Goodbye, Greg," he said. "And—er—thanks, old boy!"

Greg said levelly, "That's all right, Goodbye." He said, less levelly, "Goodbye, Miss Andrews."

But Crystal and Breadon were already turning toward the portal, toward the cruiser that would carry them back to an easier, gentler world. So at the end, there were no last farewells. Just a single word, and silence.

Yet somehow, strangely, Greg Malcolm did not mind too

much. For in losing one thing, he had found much more. He was bulwarked with greater, truer friends than most men ever know . . . he stood in a cave that was his home . . . on a new world that was yet his shining, unblemished empire.

And there was the touch of a warm hand on his own.



“The Squared Circle”

*Another Arc of:
The Squared Circle*

So many years ago that I have forgotten the source, I read that the Popul Vuh, a sacred book and cosmogony of the Mayans, it is written that the era in which we live is not the first civilized age of man but the fourth; the gods having ordained that whenever mankind's culture becomes too great it shall be destroyed and civilization be compelled to start all over again. The age in which we live, the legend persists, was preceded by three others: the Age of Fire, the Age of Water, and the Age of Monkeys.

This concept so intrigued me that I proceeded to write a tetralogy of novels, each dealing with one of those eras, individually discrete but collectively titled *The Squared Circle*.

All four were published in magazine form. Earlier they appear in book form in my novel *Exiles of Time*, dealing with the Age of Fire, describing the culture of the island Mu, destroyed when a comet struck the earth. Here now is offered the novel dealing with the strangest of these eras: the age when a culture was more simian than human.

Admittedly this story demands of the reader what has been called the willing suspension of disbelief. But can you think of a better explanation for the mystery of far, remote, magnificent temple of Angkor Wat?

Nelson S. Bond



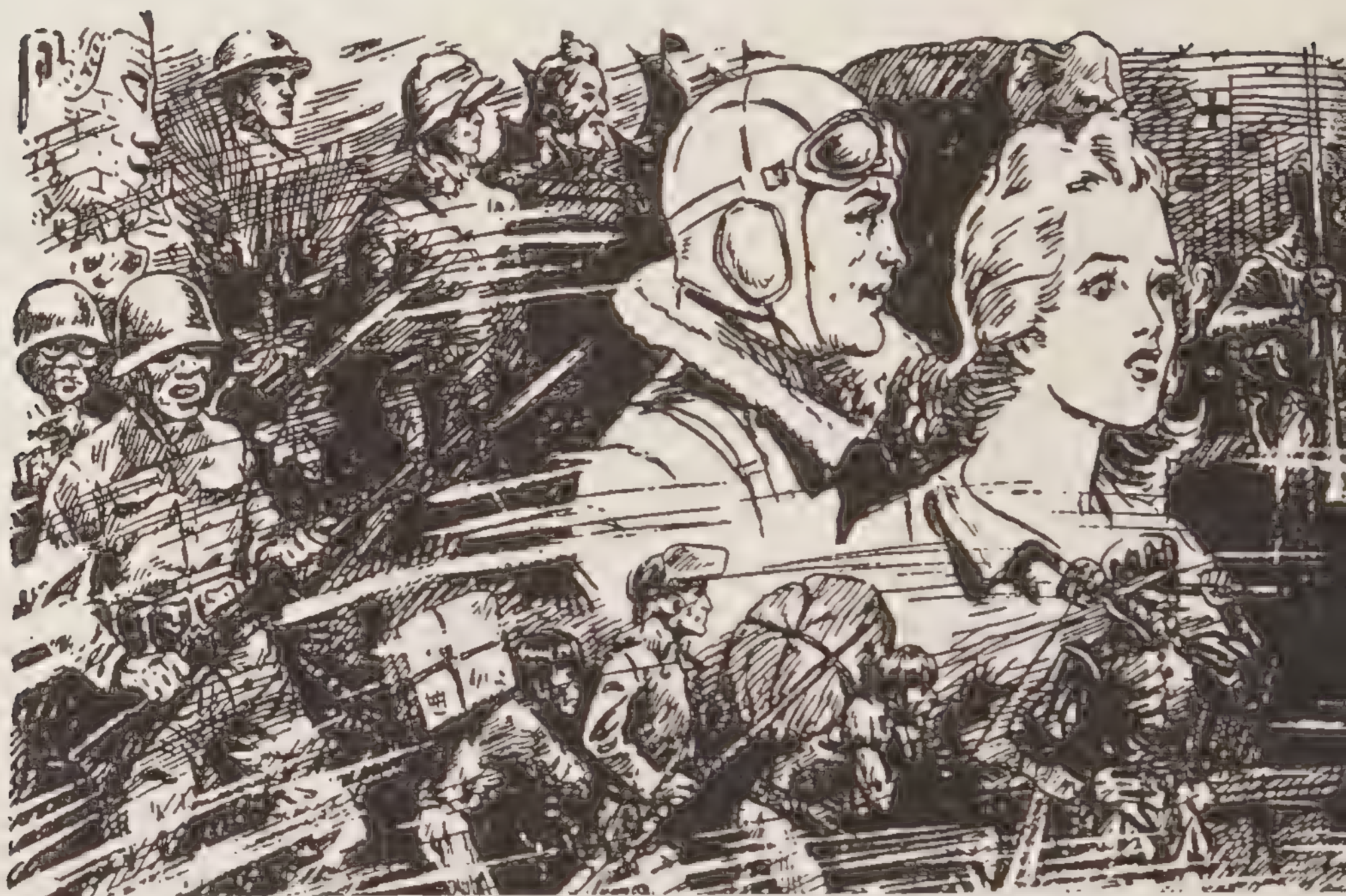
Gods of the Jungle

Deep in the ruined temple was a strange room;
and when Ramey came out of it, many centuries
of time had been wiped out . . .

IN THE DARKNESS BEFORE THE DAWN, THE SKY WAS A vault of purple-black, hoarfrosted with the spangles of innumerable stars. The moon, in its dying quarter, was a silver scimitar dangling low on the horizon; the earth below, from this lofty eyrie, was a shadowy disc more sensed than seen.

Ramey Winters, glancing briefly from the illuminated instrument panel into the tree-spired obscurity over which he flew, felt once more, as oftentimes before during these last few weeks, the tugging hand of beauty at his heart, and a curious wonderment that Night's jet mask could so completely disguise the grim world slumbering below.

Burma by day was beautiful—but its beauty was that of the awakened Amazon, bronze-girdled and strident, riding to battle with breasts straitlaced, with soft hands gripping the sword. Steel monsters, heavy-laden, groaned endlessly up the ancient Road which sprawls from Mandalay to Bhamo and Momein, thence, over tortuous ways ripped from sheer precipice by the naked hands of a million unpaid patriots, to Tai-fu and Chunking carrying arms and supplies to a beleaguered Dragon. Of late there were other rumblings, too. The tramp of shuttling troops, the ominous rasp of mechanized units, the hornet-tone of aircraft winging to their bases.



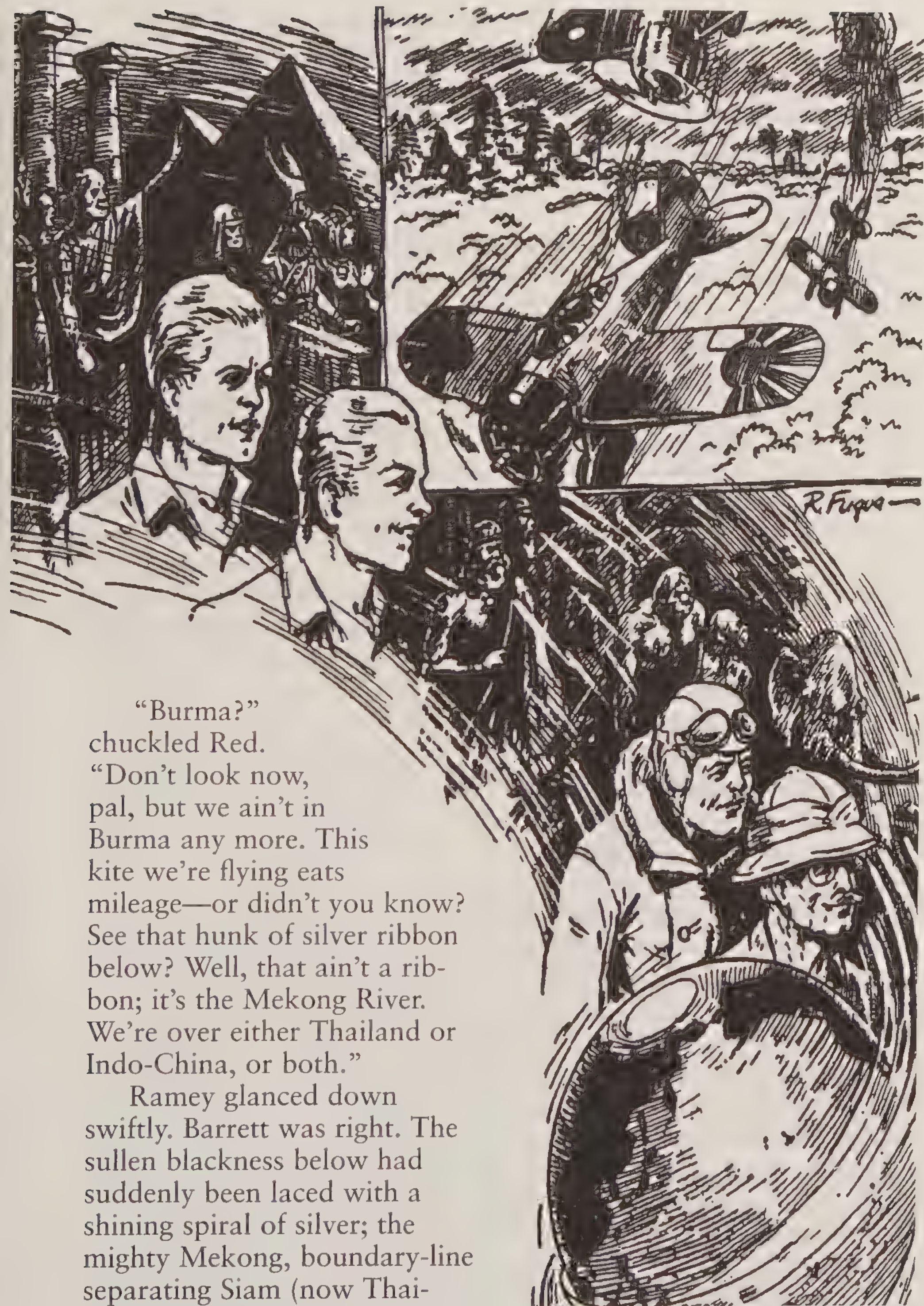
So Burma by day; a Burma not yet actively in the War but perilously close. But Burma by night—ah, that, thought Ramey Winters, was another story. Burma by night . . . seen from the sky. A new land: a sweet, wild land of mystery and charm . . . of silver and shadow . . . cool, chaste, serene! As untouched and untouchable as the brooding gods of its people. Burma—a land of stirring song and stranger story. Even up here, in these thin heights where the air should be fresh and cool, it seemed to Ramey that his nostrils scented wisps of sandalwood and musk. And beneath the persistent drone of his own motors seemed to tremble the faint, exotic pleading of native pipes.

It was a night of magic. Barrett felt it, too. Red Barrett, hard-boiled and devil-may-care as they come, Ramey's chum and co-pilot—even he felt it. He flashed his teeth at Ramey in an approving grin.

"Pretty, eh, keed?"

"Swell!" said Ramey. "Terrific! Kipling was right. Burma is the most beautiful country in the world."*

* The Burma Road is the vital supply route over which the Chinese Republic, cut off from almost all sea commerce by the Japanese invaders, still maintains contact with the outside world. Were it closed, it is doubtful whether the valiant army of General Chiang Kai-shek could long continue its fight against aggression.—Ed.



"Burma?"
chuckled Red.
"Don't look now,
pal, but we ain't in
Burma any more. This
kite we're flying eats
mileage—or didn't you know?
See that hunk of silver ribbon
below? Well, that ain't a rib-
bon; it's the Mekong River.
We're over either Thailand or
Indo-China, or both."

Ramey glanced down
swiftly. Barrett was right. The
sullen blackness below had
suddenly been laced with a
shining spiral of silver; the
mighty Mekong, boundary-line
separating Siam (now Thai-
land) and French Indo-China

for more than 1,000 miles, coiled through the jungle like a gigantic serpent, its scales drenched with moonlight.

Winters' dreaminess vanished instantly. One look at the instrument panel and he shot into action. A tug and kick swung the old Curtis into a lifting, southward arc, following the twisting river. His words to Red Barrett were unhurried, but there was tenseness in his voice.

"Okay. This is it, then. Keep 'em peeled, Red!"

"If I peel 'em any finer," Barrett grunted, "I won't have any eyelids. Think we'll see anything?"

"I know damn well we will. Those Japs aren't moving south for a clambake. They poured forty divisions into Indo-China—thanks to Vichy! Thailand is next on the hit parade; then Burma, back door to India. They want to close the Burma Road. So long as it's open, old Chiang Kai-shek will keep on giving them fits. Our job is to find out where they are concentrating their troops, so we'll be ready for them when they prance into Thailand."

Red looked hungrily at the triggerpress before him. "If there's troops," he said hopefully, "there'll be enemy 'planes, huh, Ramey? Supposing one of them comes up to meet us? Can I—?"

"No! Definitely not!"

"But just by accident, like? I mean, if he attacked us first—"

"No, Red. Don't you see, all they're waiting for is an excuse to invade Thailand? Let us shoot down a single Jap 'plane tonight, and tomorrow their bombers will be over Bangkok. So—no shooting! Even if they fire on us."

"We-e-ell—" grumbled Barrett—"okay! But I think it's a hell of a way to fight a war. They bombed the *Tetuila* and sank the *Panay*, and all we got was: 'So sorry! Accidents will happen!' We're not even supposed to defend ourselves."

Ramey grinned at him; a lean knowing grin.

"Don't you worry about that, pal. Your Uncle Samuel knows what he's doing. You and I were in the U. S. Army airforce till the bewhiskered old gentleman in the striped pants graciously permitted us to 'resign' and fly for China. But I notice our paychecks still bear Yankee signatures. And don't forget—there are a thousand more like us. Neutral soldiers of fortune, learning the ropes 'just in case.'

"But we've got to keep our noses clean tonight. Get all the pictures and information we can, but don't get in any scrapes—them's our orders. Well, where are we now?"

As they talked, Red had been deciding, as well as he could, their route on the scroll-map before him. Now he drew a dubious circle. "Here, maybe. Or here. About Kiangkhan."

"Good enough. And nothing stirring yet, hey? Well, we'll keep looking for a few more minutes, then head back before dawn—*Hey!* Get a load of that! Campfires! A bivouac! Mark it, Red!"

The command was unnecessary. Barrett had also seen the encampment, scored it on his chart. But now, as the pair craned intently into the flame-dotted dark below, striving to guess the strength of the enemy outpost, there leaped to life that which startled both of them to awareness of a new peril. Searchbeams burst suddenly from the ground, snaring them in a dazzling web; floodlights blazed a golden square in the black jungle; there came the first, frantic coughs of anti-aircraft fire—*phum-phum!*—from invisible guns, and the biting snarl of hastily-revving motors. And:

"Get going!" roared Barrett. "We hit the jack-pot! It's an enemy airfield!"

Ramey needed no prodding. The first slashing finger of light had quickened into action the trained reflexes of an airman; already the small pursuit 'plane was lifting, bobbing and weaving away from the telltale beams. Now he gave it the gun; the snub-nosed Curtis flattened and streaked away like a startled swallow.

None too soon. Whatever shortcomings the Japs might have as warriors, they were speedy little devils. The Yankee fliers gained but a few minutes, a few short miles, advantage before their pursuers were in the air.

Even so, it should not have been difficult to escape in the dark. If it had only stayed dark as it should at this time of year, as it would have in any other place imaginable. But—this was the Orient, the semi-tropical topsy-turvy land that skirts the China Seas.

Over the eastward horizon toward which they fled, an edge of ochre crept. Thin haze and hesitant; then deepening, widening, spreading, into a pearly, crepuscular veil. A cold and cheerless light against the backdrop of which their ship, both men knew, loomed as a perfect target!

Ramey gasped his dismay.

"Dawn! But—but that's impossible! It's only four o'clock. The sun shouldn't rise until—"

"*False dawn!*" corrected Barrett with sudden, comprehending savagery. "The famous 'dawn-before-sunrise'—that's what it is! I've read about it. It's possible anywhere, but it happens mostly in this part of the Orient. Result of flat country . . . heat . . . wide

expanse of Pacific . . . refraction. You're heading the wrong way, pal."

Ramey nodded tightly.

"I know. I headed southeast to confuse them; didn't want to tip off our base. I thought we could swing back when they gave up. But now—"

"Now what?"

"We can't turn back or they'd nab us, sure," gritted Ramey. "Our only chance is to outrun them. Maybe we can get to Singapore or—"

"On what?" queried Barrett. "Marsh-gas from passing swamps? This crate's only fueled for a thousand miles, keed. We've used half of that. And Singapore's a good nine hundred south."

"We might make Bangkok—"

"Or Australia," suggested Barrett drily, "or Hawaii? All right chum—pull the cork. You ain't kidding me. This is the payoff, huh?"

Ramey, glancing up from the panel, met his comrade's calm, untroubled eyes levelly for a moment. In that instant, it occurred to him that Red Barrett was a hell of a fine guy. He wanted to say so, but men can't say such things. Sometimes they don't have to. He just nodded.

"I guess so, redhead."

"I won four bucks from Jimmy Larkin yesterday," said Red irrelevantly, "playing rummy. I should have collected it then." Again his eyes sought the machine-gun hopefully. "As long as we're in for it, we might just as well use up our old ammunition, huh, Ramey? We—" he hinted virtuously—"don't want to let no *matériel* fall into enemy hands—"

Ramey shook his head decisively.

"We won't fire on them. Not even if they fire on us first. Not even if they shoot us down. We can't risk causing the 'incident' they want. Our only chance is to outrun them, Red."

"Then we're in a hell of a pickle," Barrett told him gloomily. "Because they're faster than us. They're catching us now. Hold your hat, keed. Here it comes!"

And with his warning, it came! The first chattering snarl of machine-gun fire from the foremost of their pursuers. Lead ripped and slashed at the fleeing Curtis; above the roar of the motor shrilled the *spang!* of metal on metal. Ramey saw a crazy, zigzag line appear miraculously in the cowlings above him, heard the thin,

high, disappointed whine of ricochetting bullets. Again he tugged, kicked. His 'plane leaped, darted to the right. Red grunted.

"Whew! That was close! One more like that—"

As if his words were an omen, another burst screamed about their ears. And the lethal cacophony was doubled, now; the second of their three attackers had found the range. The little ship seemed to jerk like a live thing as fiery pellets pierced its skin. It was only a matter of minutes before one of those bullets would find a vital spot, Ramey knew. No use continuing this unequal battle. Knuckles white on the stick, he yelled to his companion:

"Okay, Red—bail out! They can't land here. Maybe we can get away on the ground. Red! *Red!*"

Then, as there came neither answering word nor movement, he shot a quick glance at his buddy. One look told the story. Red did not move because he could not. Limp as a bag of sodden meal, he lay slumped in his seat, eyes closed, arms dangling uselessly at his sides. And in horrible contrast to the pallor of his cheeks, his face was mottled with a spreading nastiness that matched the color of his hair!

It was at that moment a sort of madness seized Ramey Winters. He was a soldier, aware of, and daily accepting, the hazards of his calling. He had seen death often; had several times heard whispering within inches of his own ears the sigh of the ancient scythe. It did not sicken him to see men die, nor was he afraid to die himself . . .

But this—this was different! This time the reaper had struck down Red Barrett, his chum, his more-than-brother. Struck him down traitorously and from behind without a chance to defend himself. Red, who had asked nothing more than to go down fighting—and had not been granted that break!

It did not even occur to Ramey that as he sat there, stunned, stricken, about him still hammered the blazing darts of enemy fire. There was welling within him a great flame, a torrential, all-consuming fire of rage that burned through his veins like vitriol. And suddenly it no longer seemed to matter that he was under orders to avoid all fights; the problem of an "international incident" was a hollow legality in which he had no concern.

If he thought at all, his thoughts were mere rationalization. Three Japanese flyers—and himself! Lost in the clouds above a wild, green jungle. Unspied upon, unseen. If none of the three were ever to return to his base, who was to report this episode? Who accuse the Thais of violating their neutrality? And did it make

much difference, anyway? Everyone knew the *Sons of Heaven*—on some excuse or other—would march into Siam when they were ready. So—

Ramey decided. His hand found the trigger-press for which Red's fingers had yearned. A kick on the rudder . . . knee to the gun . . . and the tiny Curtis came up and over like a wild bird soaring. And it was no longer a startled swallow, but a killer-shrike, vengeance-bent and striking with the pent fury of boundless wrath. The butcher-bird darting on its prey.

And finding it! Before the foremost of his pursuers could analyze and parry this unexpected maneuver, Winters was upon him. In the circular machine-gun sight the Jap airplane loomed nearer, larger, more solid. Then—the gun bucked and kicked against his palms. The vision before him quivered and seemed to crumple, sheered off and away, spun giddily . . .

"*One!*" said Ramey Winters, and did not know he spoke aloud. "That's one!"

He kicked over, sensing a danger behind him, and in that one motion became attacker rather than attacked. It was a closer thing this time. His foeman's gun bore squarely upon him for a brief, unguarded moment. Ramey felt something like the jerk of a hand on his sleeve, and glancing down, saw with mild astonishment that his leather flying coat was split from wristband to elbow, spilling powdery fleece.

Then his 'plane righted itself, his own gun answered and—it was a most amazing thing! Before his eyes the enemy ship blossomed into a crimson bloom with burgeoning petals of black! A flower which suddenly burst asunder and spiraled to earth in a host of flaming motes.

And that, he thought grimly, was *two!* The third—?

Swiftly he scanned the ever-lightening skies, but he could not locate the missing 'plane. For a breathless moment he feared that in the melee it had escaped; then the voice of his old Combat Instructor at Kelly Field seemed to whisper an old, almost forgotten warning:

"*If you can't see it—look out! It's on your tail!*"

Once more, and this time with frantic haste, he shot the ship into a climb, a wingover turn. But not before a hot hail, punching on metal behind him like the vibrant tattoo of pounding rivets, rasped a song of death in his ears. Then he was on a level with his enemy—and driving headlong at him!

For a yearlong moment it seemed inevitable they must crash head on, collide and destroy each other and go hurtling to earth

locked in flaming, loveless embrace! But not for an instant did Ramey's finger relax its pressure on the trigger. And when scant yards separated their whirling propellers, his bullets found their mark. The enemy pilot suddenly collapsed in his seat; his body, pitching forward, was a dead weight on the stick. And with a shuddering groan, the last Jap fighter nosed earthward in a streaking dive!

It was a moment of triumph. But Ramey Winters never found time to savor that victory. For even as he pulled back on the stick to lift himself clear of the falling 'plane, the stick went dead in his hands! From somewhere deep within the entrails of the gallant little Curtis came the grinding clash of metals. At the last moment, a dying foeman had evened the score. Ramey's motors spluttered and died, and the thin song of wind lashing the fuselage was the only audible sound in an awful silence as the ship, like a dancing leaf, glided earthward out of control.

There was but one thing to do. Ramey plucked at the buckle of his safety belt, prepared to go overside. And Red? Well—it was an airman's burial. A moment of flame, then an unmarked grave in the jungle. Ramey glanced once more at his chum. "So long, Red," he whispered. "See you again, pal—"

Then he gasped. For Red's lips had fallen open, and a bubble of bloody spittle was leaking from one corner of his mouth—but this tiny spume pulsated faintly! Breathing! He was still alive!

And it was no longer possible for Ramey to take to his 'chute. Somehow, *somehow!* he must get this crippled ship to earth. He stared down wildly. Trees . . . trees . . . an endless tangle of foliage towering high, bayonet-tipped. But—Ramey trembled with sudden, feverish eagerness—over there a patch of lighter green! And something that looked like gray walls, a manmade building! A cleared field. If he could—

Once more and desperately he wrestled with the unresponsive stick. No good! The rudders, then? If the aileron wires were undamaged he might be able to control, to some extent, the direction of their glide. Ease the brutal shock of landing.

But now the ground was a vast, blunt bulwark rushing up to meet them. Like an organist treading the pedals of his instrument, Ramey played the only controls he had. Composing out of urgency and stress a symphony which, when the ultimate note was scored, must be either a paean or a dirge!

And the ship responded. Weakly, true! But its nose lifted a trifle, the ailerons caught and gripped the air, the drifting leaf spun lazily toward the clearing. Earth looming larger, and the indistin-

guishable whole of the jungle sharpened to single trees and tangled groves of bamboo and liana. Gray of swamp water and brown of soil; sudden pink of a frightened flamingo racing for leafy covert. Almost down now and the wind howling through the motionless propeller like a taunting fiend. His own voice, strange in his ears, calling senseless encouragement to his unhearing companion:

“All right, Red! Hold tight, boy! In a minute—”

Then one wheel touched the ground, bounced; the ship reeled shuddering forward. Clear of the trees, but careening wildly, drunkenly, across a furrowed field. Rocking, swaying madly.

Then—the crash! The moment of slashing pain . . . the dancing light . . . the numb despair. Then nothing . . .

CHAPTER II

The Mystery of Angkor

When you are dead, the little demons gather and make merry. They will not let you rest. Huddled about your weary soul they chatter in bee-thin voices; they lift your head and force open your lips and pour molten fire down your throat, a liquid fire that chokes and strangles.

Ramey strangled on liquid fire, and opened his eyes. He—he was not dead, after all, but alive! The sweetness of native brandy was on his lips, the far voices waxed nearer as consciousness returned, and he was surrounded by the familiar figures of *not* scarlet imps but human beings!

Or—wait a minute! Maybe his first hunch was right after all. For *most* of those staring down at him looked like people, but surely the vision bent closest was that of an angel? A golden-haired angel with heaven-blue eyes, warm lips, a cool, white skin which the sun seemed never to have burned, but only to have endowed with a memory of its own inner glow.

“Lovely!” said Ramey drowsily, and the vision’s face colored most unecclesiastically. Behind Ramey someone chuckled. Ramey, turning painfully, saw a tall, mahogany-skinned, nice-looking youngster with brown hair and eyes, dancing eyes crow’s-footed with the wrinkles of perpetual mirth. This lad and the girl, he saw now, were the only whites in the circle. All the others were natives. The young man laughed again.

“Well, Sheila, there doesn’t seem to be anything the matter with *this* one! Or with his emotional reflexes.”

Recollection seeped slowly back upon Ramey. He made an effort to rise.

"The—the 'plane," he said confusedly. "Went dead. I tried to set 'er down in a field. Crashed—"

The girl restrained him gently but firmly. The cool touch of her hands was soothing.

"You must lie still, now. Everything is going to be all right. You did crash, yes. But fortunately we were here to drag you and your friend out before the 'plane caught fire. After you've rested for a moment, we'll take you to camp—"

It all came back to Ramey now. This time the girl's hands could not prevent him from raising himself.

"Red! Is—is he all right, too?"

The young man answered.

"Your buddy? I suppose so, or Syd would be chanting a funeral march by now. Hey, Syd! How's your patient?"

The huddle encircling Ramey split, admitting a third white man. Ramey glanced at him casually, then started, took another good look, and turned to peer over his shoulder again at the one who had called. The two young men were as like as two peas in a pod. Same height, build, coloring. Only their facial expressions differed. The newcomer's face was as dour as the first chap's was jovial. He commented acidly, "I wish you wouldn't be so boisterous, Lake! I guess he has a chance to recover—if complications don't set in. Of course, these head injuries are dangerous. It may be a fractured skull, or he may lose his sight—"

"Blind!" gasped Ramey. "Red? Oh, Lord—"

For the third time, the girl quieted him. This time with a smile. "Don't get excited, soldier. Your companion's apparently in fine shape. That's just Syd's nice, optimistic way of viewing things. 'Fractured skull or loss of sight' is a favorable prognosis—coming from *him*! If it were anything *really* serious, Syd would have the workmen digging a grave by now. Are you sure you feel well enough to get up?"

Ramey nodded, not daring to risk speech as he got to his feet. His head throbbed like a concrete mixer, and there were rubber pipes where his shinbones should be. But somehow he managed it, and once off the ground, began to feel better. He strode to Barrett's side. The blood had been sponged from the redhead's face, and his head was rudely, but efficiently, bandaged. He grinned at Ramey.

"Hyah, Sunday-driver! Next time holler before we go under a low bridge. I forgot to duck!"

Ramey said, "You're lucky that bullet bounced itself off your

bean. If it had hit anything less solid you'd be on a slab now. How's the head feel?"

"Like a wisdom tooth stuffed with sugar," complained Red. "If it's not too much trouble, keed, how's for bringing me up to date on the news? Where are we? And how did we get here?"

It was the smiling young man who supplied the answer to the first question. He said, "You're at Angkor, Cambodia, French Indo-China. I'm Lake O'Brien. The walking scowl over there is my brother, Syd, and to save time, yes, we're twins. The young lady is Miss Shelia Aiken; her father is the leader of our expedition. We're Americans. Southeastern University Archeological Expedition, if that means anything to you. But how about you? You're from the U.S.A., too, aren't you?"

Ramey nodded. "Flying for the Republic. That is—we were until the Japs tagged us this morning. The reclining ex-airman with the bandaged dome is Bob Barrett, 'Red' to all but his color-blind friends. I'm Ramey Winters. We're greatly indebted to you for your help."

"Forget it!" grinned Lake. But the less genial twin shook his head gloomily.

"This is a nasty mess. Indo-China is under Japanese 'protection,' you know. If any of the Japs saw that dogfight from their camp down the river, there'll be troops up here in an hour or so to investigate."

"Dogfight?" echoed Barrett. He stared at Ramey with sudden understanding. "So *that's* it! That's where they disappeared to? Why, you scrapping son-of-a-gun! Get all three of them?"

Ramey nodded guiltily.

"I—I sort of blew my conk. I thought you—I mean—Oh, hell! What's the difference? O'Brien's right. I got us all in a jam. The only thing for us to do, Red, is to get the hell out of here, but quick! Before we implicate a bunch of innocent bystanders. So, friends, if you'll point the way to the Thai border—"

But it was the girl, Sheila, who this time spoke up.

"Nothing of the sort! You're in no fit condition to head into the jungle, either of you! Besides, you'll have to have food, water, blankets. And Daddy will want to see you."

Lake O'Brien voiced agreement.

"Sheila's right, Winters. This is a pretty secluded spot. Chances are no one but us saw you crash. Even if they did, it'll take them quite a while to get up the river."

"We-e-e-ll—" hesitated Ramey. It was Red's obvious weakness

that decided him. First aid was all right, but rest was what the scarlet-top needed. "If you think it's safe—" he said.

So they started across the field. Only Syd O'Brien, frowning uncertainly, ventured any unfavorable comment on the move. The sour-visaged twin offered Barrett a supporting arm but grumbled even as he did so.

"I don't like it!" he muttered forebodingly. "We're doing a foolish thing. And no good will come of it . . ."

What sort of camp Ramey Winters had expected to see, he did not clearly know. Something, perhaps, like the tented digs at Petra—Ramey had once visited the rose-red cliffs in Arabia—or the shacks at Ur-of-the-Chaldees. Archeology led men into strange, wild places. There would be ruins here, no doubt; Ramey dimly remembered having glimpsed gray buildings, or something of the sort, in the hectic moments preceding the crash.

But never in the world had he dreamed of seeing that which he actually beheld! Beyond the field sprawled a narrow grove of cane and palm; when they had eased their way through this, they stood on the edge of a wide, sluggish stream, once more looking out across flat terrain. And—

Ramey's eyes widened. Speech died at the incredible sight before him. Because the stream was not a stream, but a seven hundred foot moat, circling to left and right as far as the eye could see, spanned by a tremendous paved causeway of sandstone which arched into the central portico of a gigantic structure!

And what a structure! Roughly rectangular, at least one mile long on every side, comprised of one massive central building and numberless, smaller, flanking ones. The central edifice consisted of three stages connected by numerous outer staircases, decreasing in dimension as they rose, culminating in a lofty, pyramidal tower.

Red Barrett was popeyed, too. But the redthatch was never speechless. He croaked, "Holy potatoes, Ramey—what's that? Do you see what I see?"

"If I don't," answered Ramey, "we're both that way!" And he turned to Lake O'Brien helplessly. "What—?"

Lake grinned.

"Temple of Angkor," he explained. "Angkor Wat. You mean to say you've never heard of it?"

"Never! Who lives here?"

"Nobody," chuckled Lake, "but us archeologists. You see—But never mind! Here comes Dr. Aiken. I'll let him do the explaining. It's his pigeon."

Having met Sheila, Ramey would have known without an explanation her relationship to the man now approaching. The scientist's hair was iron-gray where hers was golden, and his shoulders were hunched with long years of poring over pottery shards from obscure kitchen middens, but they shared the same fine, small-boned structure, the same wide brows, startlingly identical mist-blue eyes. He was accompanied by two natives, aides of superior rank, evidently, since they were dressed in European clothing.

Dr. Ian Aiken was an efficient man. In what sounded to Ramey like one, continuous sentence, he introduced himself and his two Asiatic assistants—"Sirabhar and Tomasaki; very fine boys, very!"—sent the gaping workmen about their jobs, and herded the group toward the temple. As they walked along he sated his own apparently boundless curiosity with a resume of the important facts; by the time they had reached the camp headquarters, a group of sheltered chambers within the temple proper, he had appraised the situation and formed a decision.

"Sheila was correct!" he snapped brusquely. "Errant nonsense to even consider leaving here! Barret's wound will need attention. You're both tired. Need a good rest."

"But the Japs?" reminded Ramey. "Syd says they have a camp several hours down the river?"

"Blast the Japs!" retorted Aiken pettishly. "Greedy little yellow beasts, anyway. Never did like 'em! Don't you worry about the Japs. Needn't know you're here. You two get out of those uniforms, burn 'em. If they come sticking their dirty little snub-noses in here, you'll be two junior members of my party. Diplomatic immunity. Won't dare touch you!"

Barret nodded to Ramey. "That's so, pal. The Japs ain't looking for no more trouble with Uncle Sam just now; not till Hitler turns on the green light, anyhow. Even if they do see our crashed 'plane, they'll think we burned up in it."

"Unless one of the laborers spills the beans," Ramey reminded. "But if Dr. Aiken thinks its safe—?"

"Think? I know it! My men won't say a word. Not a word. Absolutely loyal, every one of them. Furthermore, the Cambodians hate the Japs as much as we do. More! Isn't that right, Tomasaki? All right, now—get along with you! Clean clothes and a shower. Then we'll all have a bite to eat."

So, smiling, the two young airmen left their peppery host for the time being. Clothes were donated to them, khaki shirts and whipcord breeches from the wardrobes of their new-found friends.

Barrett was clothed from the locker of Johnny Grinnell, only member of the expedition they had not yet met; Ramey found the duds of either of the tall O'Briens a perfect fit.

Thus it was that, feeling like new men, a short time later they sat down to breakfast. The meal was as American as a World Series, at least to two who had taken their fare for months in a Chinese Republic mess-hall. Cereal, ham and eggs, griddlecakes with maple syrup, coffee—hot, black, aromatic coffee instead of green tea!—tempted Ramey into over-eating till the waistband of Lake O'Brien's breeches strained like a sausage skin.

It was then, after the empty dishes had been removed and he dragged the luxurious fragrance of American-cigarette-smoke into his lungs, that Ramey brought up the subject which had perplexed him ever since he first saw this place.

"Dr. Aiken," he said, "if I weren't sitting right *in* this building, seeing it with my own eyes, I wouldn't believe it could exist. I never dreamed there was such a place! How long has it been here?"

The archeologist quirked an eyebrow at Lake O'Brien, who grinned back. The others—Sheila, Grinnell, even Syd—seemed to share his amusement. Dr. Aiken shook his head.

"I don't know, Winters," he said.

"But then—who built it?"

Again an arch grin. "I don't know that, either."

For a moment Ramey stared at him bewilderedly. Then a slow flush stained his cheeks. Oh, that was it? They were poking fun at him; mocking his ignorance? Well, all right—if they wanted to act that way—

"Excuse me" he said stiffly. "I didn't understand. Sorry to be so stupid. Red, perhaps we'd better get ready to run along, after all. We seem to be in the way here."

But Ian Aiken stayed him with a hand on the arm. He was still grinning, but his grin was warm and friendly. "Sit down, Ramey and don't be an ass. We're not laughing at you. We're amused because the situation is *what* it is: so baffling that we must either smile it off or surrender.

"The answers I just gave you were absolutely true—and no man alive can tell you more. The mystery of Angkor is this: that here in the depths of an aboriginal jungle we find a temple dwarfing the greatest architectural work of present-day Man, and a city large enough to hold thirty million souls—yet not a man in the world knows *who* built this marvel, or *when* it was built, or *where*

the builders came from, or where, above all, vanished the mighty race which once lived here!"

CHAPTER III

The Vanished Race

For a moment Ramey Winters stared at the gray-haired scientist incredulously. Then he laughed. "All right, sir," he said. "I'll bite. What's the gag?"

But there was no twinkle of amusement in Dr. Aiken's eyes now. He leaned forward over the table, his manner sober and abruptly serious.

"It's no joke, Ramey. It's the cold truth." In his voice was a strange note, a sort of angry helplessness. "For years men have been pondering this problem, but still the answer eludes us.

"In the year 1860, the French naturalist, A. Mouhot, came up the Mekong River in search for flora and fauna, and by sheer chance stumbled upon the massive, walled city of Angkor Thom, about one mile from here. I used the word, 'stumbled'; actually, only the toe of a giant could trip over such an obstacle. For Angkor Thom is a rectangular enclose two miles in each direction, surrounded by a wall thirty feet high; within these walls are more than fifty towers, averaging two hundred feet in height! Altogether, the wall encloses something like a hundred and seventy-six acres of palaces, terraces, temples and galleries!

"That was the city proper. For miles about were the ruins of smaller abodes. This building in which we have made our headquarters, Angkor Wat, is supposed to have been Angkor Thom's chief temple. You have already exclaimed at its size. Let me point out that you cannot completely grasp how huge it is because there exists here no basis for comparison but palm trees, fromager, cane. The façade of this single building is five times as wide as the Cathedral of Notre Dame!

"Naturally, Mouhot was greatly excited. The records of mankind did not even hint at there ever having been such a civilization in this part of the world. He asked his native guides whence came these structures, who built them?

"Their answer was—the Gods!"

Ramey Winters nodded, fascinated. "I can understand that. Whatever men conceived and fashioned this edifice were of god-like stature. Before the world went crazy, I studied a smattering of architecture. Enough to realize the tremendous effort expended here—"

"Ah, but you haven't begun to see the wonders! Look at the walls and ceilings of this room, my boy."

"I've been looking at them," spoke up Barrett. Darned things is simply lousy.—'scuse me, Miss Shella!—I mean the walls and ceilings is covered from top to bottom with carving and stuff. Pictures and wiggly scrolls and everything. What was this? Part of the art gallery?"

Dr. Aiken smiled distantly.

"Yes, Red. A very, very small portion of the hugest art gallery ever known. Because every square inch of wall in both Angkor Thom and Angkor Wat is covered with similar stone sculpturing! There are murals two hundred . . . three hundred feet long emblazoned with the images of thousands of warriors in battle! A statue of a *naga*, or seven-headed serpent, more than one hundred feet long. Figures of gods and men, of evil demons, of creatures unlike anything known to Man. About the grounds are single stones a hundred feet high, hand-carven to represent gods whose names we do not know."

Ramey frowned. "Now, wait a minute, Doctor. That's impossible, you know! I mean, a hundred feet high—"

"I quite agree with you, Ramey. Such sculpturing is impossible to present-day civilization. My colleague, Alfred Maynard, once wrote: 'To transport these monoliths and erect the colossi, strength was wielded that our machinery does not supply.' A true statement of the case. The nearest quarries of the stone of which Angkor was built are twenty miles away! Modern engineering could no more duplicate the feat of building this structure than it could match the Pyramid of Cheops!

"Yet even if this gigantic task of transportation of materials could be accomplished—what craftsmen today could match the stone-engraving of these walls? The ancient workmen used no cement. With what incredible tools they pierced this stone into delicate images, we cannot guess. The pillars are as painstakingly filigreed as if wrought by a goldsmith. In a chamber I shall show you—a subterranean niche discovered by Lake, here—is something even more remarkable. A cabinet of *metal*, inscribed with hieroglyphs eroded just enough to be indecipherable!"

Lake answered Ramey's questioning glance with a nod.

"That's right. Damnedest thing I ever saw. Sort of a cube, about twelve feet square. Hollow, too. But I can't find any way to open it. The inscription probably tells what it's all about, but as the Doc says, you can't quite read it. Almost, but not quite. It's tantalizing. Like a picture out of focus, or—"

"Probably just as well." That was Syd O'Brien voicing his gloomy opinion. "Don't like the looks of the thing. Sinister."

"I'd like to see it," said Ramey. "I'd like to take a week or so and see everything about this place—What's up, Red?"

The redhead, seated nearest the doorway of the room, had come suddenly to his feet with a warning gesture. Now he whispered hoarsely, "Doc—outside! A spy! Somebody's found out about me and Ramey being here!"

In a single motion, Ramey was on his feet, his automatic in his hand, was gliding to his friend's side. Red was right. Ramey was just in time to see a furtive figure, scar-faced, yellow-robed, Oriental, slip behind one of the numberless pillars supporting the corridor. He spun.

"Red's right! They're on to us. I knew we couldn't get away with this. Everybody sit tight; Red and I are going to pull out before we get you all in trouble . . ."

Then Johnny Grinnell was at his shoulder, and he was snorting amused relief. "It's all right, Winters. Put your pistol up. It's only poor old Sheng-ti. He's probably hungry again; daft old devil!" He called quietly in a tongue that Ramey—though he did not speak the language—recognized as Cantonese. Slowly the figure emerged from behind the pillar. Ramey saw a lean, shaven-pated Oriental of indeterminate age clad in the filthy yellow robe of a Buddhist *bonze*, or priest.

The *bonze* moved forward hesitantly, his eyes darting suspicion at the two strangers. As he approached, his mumble became English words.

"Food! The child of Buddha hungers."

"Very well, Sheng-ti," said Grinnell soothingly, "We share with thee." Aside, to Ramey, he explained, "Sheng-ti's a *ku'an-chu*, Most Holy One. Not quite right up here. Not an ounce of harm in him, though. We feed him, and he calls down Buddha's blessing on us. Fair enough, eh? Behold, Sheng-ti, we have guests! The bird-men from the sky have come to visit us."

The priest glowered at the two strangers malevolently.

"Later we shall show them the wonders of the temple," continued Grinnell. "They would see the statues of the gods, the fountains and the hidden crypt—"

At his last words, a spasm of something akin to terror passed over the face of the yellow man. His eyes clouded and he thrust long-taloned hands before his face as if fending off a blow. His voice lifted in a discordant croak.

"*Aie* doom!" he cried. "Doom . . . doom . . . doom!"

And turning swiftly, he fled, ragged skirts trailing behind him, sandals slip-slopping on the stone floor. Ramey grunted.

"Well! Pleasant little harbinger of spring, isn't he? That last crack of yours went over big."

Dr. Aiken smiled.

"I shouldn't let that worry you, my boy. Sheng-ti's a dire prophet, but a poor one. He warned me three years ago that if I did not leave this temple I would 'vanish into yesteryear', never to return. Cheerful thought, wasn't it? But I'm still here.

"Now, sit down, both of you, and stop worrying about non-existent troubles. Have you forgotten we are on an island surrounded by a moat? Our watchmen guard every approach. If anyone comes near, we'll be given ample warning. Now, let me see—what were we talking about?"

"The chamber Lake discovered."

"Yes! Well, that's but one of the thousand mysteries of Angkor, Ramey. There are many more. I might point out some of the peculiarities of the sculpture itself. Oddly mingled with painstaking representations of ordinary men, are the figures of incredible, fabulous monsters. Dragons, great *nagas*, hypogrifins, monkeys garbed in human clothing, acting like men, apparently talking to each other and to humans.

"You might reasonably say that these representations are figments of the creative imagination, a sort of 'artistic license,' so to speak. But here's the rub! Whenever *men* are depicted, they are reproduced with elaborate fidelity. Not a single effort is made to aggrandize or conventionalize, as is the case in the artistry of other ancient races; the Minoan, for instance, or the Egyptian. The builders of Angkor seemed to pride themselves on faithful portrayal.

"But *why*, then, did they detract from their accuracy by delineating the figures of nonexistent creatures? And the colors they used—why did they portray some human figures as white, others yellow, and still others *blue*? Unless—" Ian Aiken's voice throbbed with eagerness— "these were creatures and men they knew?"

The older man's excitement communicated itself as an uneasy chill to Ramey. He said, "You mean—?"

"I don't know what I mean, Winters—yet. I'm still studying, still trying to unite in coherent oneness the facts imperishably carved here for someone to discern.

"All I know is that Angkor Wat is *old*—considerably older than baffled science has hitherto been willing to admit. By the eyes

and the feet of the statuary we judge its period. Blank, staring eyes, unfocussing; feet carved by artists so unaware of perspective that they exposed the soles of a walking person.

"I know, too, that the explanation is written here on these walls for him who can solve the Angkor script. We have not yet found the key. The letters seem to resemble the elder Siamese, which itself resembled Sanskrit. Perhaps we'll never unlock that lingual door.

"But there is one universal language, Ramey Winters! The language of science, mathematics, astronomy! And here we have a whole city written in that language. The arrangement of Angkor is as truly symbolic, as truly based on the mystic science of numbers, as is the famed King's Chamber of Cheops' pyramid.* And there are certain astronomical carvings—"

"But, look, Doc—" That was Red Barrett cudgelling his brow—"if this here place was discovered about 1860, the scientists ought to been able to figure it out by now. Ain't there no histories at all, no ideas how it come?"

Dr. Aiken's smile was scornful.

"Too many," he answered, "and too poor! For want of a better explanation, experts have decided that a race known as the 'Khmers' inhabited Angkor. They have even presumed to establish the period of occupancy: from about the 5th Century B.C. to the 14th Century of our Christian reckoning. Some of the more daring savants have attempted to trace the 'lineage' of Khmerian royalty.

"Gentlemen, believe me—these explanations are rank nonsense! Based on no valid records, facts, or suppositions! The learned M. Groslier, attempting to explain why Angkor Wat should lie deserted and forgotten for five hundred years in a jungle grave, presents the theory that the Khmers waged a war with the neighboring Thais, were defeated and forcibly driven from their national stronghold.

"Stupid poppycock! The weak Acadians of Nova Scotia were expelled from their homeland by armed force—yet within two generations seventy percent of them had drifted back—to tiny farms and wretched hamlets. But we are asked to believe that a great race meekly left its capital and never attempted to return!

"Yet—suppose that were true? A faint possibility, but let us

*Many devotees of the "science" of numerology are firmly convinced that the Great Pyramid of Cheops was too geometrically designed as to present to him who could decipher its structural allegory a comprehensive prophecy of the world's future for more than 5,000 years.—*Ed.*

grant it. Then why did not the conquerors move into occupy what must have been the most magnificent city on the face of the earth. Remember, at the height of its glory, Angkor Thom must have been prouder than Augustus' Rome . . . more alive with swaggering splendor than Hannibal's Carthage . . . gay and rich as the Golden Chersonese of fable!"

Ramey nodded. "Sounds whacky," he agreed. "Any more theories?"

"One even more implausible. That a plague destroyed the entire population of Angkor."

Ramey shook his head. "Well, that could have been, sir. Before the advance of medicine, plagues used to ravage whole countries periodically. The Black Death is supposed to have killed more than twenty-five million persons in Europe in the Renaissance period. The bubonic killed ten thousand a day in Constantinople during the Interregnum. Even today the Orient is swept by raging plagues—"

"I realize that, my boy. But tell me—you've heard of the Great Plague of London? What did the city look like?"

"It was a charnel-house. Death-carts . . . dead bodies in the streets . . . graveyards filled to overflowing."

"Exactly! Now, listen here! In all of Angkor Thom, there are no human remains to be found!

"You will say this merely indicates that the Khmers did not inter their dead. Perhaps they had no sepulchers, no graveyards or tombs. True. But shouldn't there be human remains somewhere in or near these structures? Even if age did rot the carcasses, there should be bones! But—there are no bones in Angkor!

"Not only that, but there are no weapons, no pottery fragments, no accoutrements! If I die, one of thirty million souls simultaneously stricken by death, my body can decay, my crumbling bones may be swept away by the winds, yes! But the Khmers wore metal bracelets, belts, buckles; used utensils of metal. Their pictures tell us so.

"Yet there is not one piece of wearing apparel to be found in all Angkor. Not a single pin, not a scrap of household furniture, not one old, discarded cooking-pot! Now, how do you account for that?"

Ramey, staring at the old archeologist, slowly shook his head. "I—I can't, sir. Can you?"

Ian Aiken's eyes were strangely introspective.

"I see but one possible solution, my boy. There was a mass emigration, purposeful, determined, complete. That—until a more

satisfactory theory presents itself—is the way I am forced to explain it. And it is an explanation at least halfway in accord with the symbolic drawing I mentioned a few minutes ago. The drawing that shows—Yes, Sirabhar?”

He broke off suddenly as the small Cambodian bustled into the room, dark eyes wide and frightened.

“Pardon, master Doctor, sir! But warriors approach. Armed forces of the Island Ones cross the South bridge.”

“This time it ain’t no false alarm, Ramey. It’s the Japs. They *did* see our ’plane crash, after all!”

CHAPTER IV

Attack

Syd O’Brien said glumly, “I knew it! Now we’re in a mess. I guess I’ll write my thesis in a Saigon prison!”

But the expedition leader turned on him testily. “Nonsense, Sydney! There is absolutely no cause for alarm. Naturally, the Japanese had to investigate a falling ’plane. But they can’t possibly know the aviators are safe, and masquerading as members of our party—” He turned to the others— “Shall we go out to meet them? It will look better. No, Sheila—I think you’d better stay here!”

The girl’s shoulders stiffened defiantly. A strange admiration brightened Ramey’s eyes. Or perhaps it was not so strange, after all. Many times, during the preceding hour of conversation, he had found his gaze wandering toward her. In a happier, more peaceful world, perhaps—

“Why should I, Daddy?”

“Sydney—” Dr. Aiken ignored the question—“you’d better go down and speak to the workmen. Reassure them. Get Tomasaki to help you. Ramey, you and Lake and I will talk to our visitors. All right, Sirabhar, you may come, too.”

“How about me, Doc?”

Dr. Aiken glanced meaningfully toward the bandage on Barrett’s head. “I think you’d better stay here and keep out of sight,” he said wryly. “That—er—turban you’re wearing is the weak spot in our story!”

A few minutes later they were moving forward to meet the Japanese scouting detail. Despite Dr. Aiken’s assurance, Ramey’s confidence was bolstered by the comforting heft of an automatic in his hip pocket. The Nipponese, over-cautious in this as in all things, had sent a sizable investigating party to Angkor. Thirty

squat, brown, dusty men; truculent; ready for any emergency.

Their captain made his mission known in a faltering, school-book English. "An airplane had been seen to descend of the sky, please. Did the gentlemen opportune to see—?"

"Good gracious—an airplane? How alarming! No, the gentlemen had not seen anything out of the ordinary. Would the honorable captain care to look around for himself?"

It struck Ramey that Dr. Aiken was sticking his neck out unnecessarily far. The captain barked commands, his company split into details of two and three wandered off in different directions. Then Ramey realized Aiken had followed the proper course. With a wide area to cover . . . with the burned ship lying a half mile off, in a field concealed by an arras of tangled bamboo . . . with the Japanese not even sure the 'plane *had* landed in this vicinity . . . the chances of their stumbling across it were extremely remote. And to have seemed any less willing to help would have been to invite suspicion.

Having done his duty, the little leader was inclined to be friendly. He stared about him with awed respect. This was a great marvel, not so? He had not known there were such sights in Cambodia. One would not suppose it from seeing the miserable hovels at Pnom-Penh, down the river. It was not, of course, to be compared with the beautiful, modern buildings of Tokyo and Kobe, still—

He sucked his teeth politely. "Who makes this great structures, please?"

"We're not sure," Dr. Aiken told him. "It was built many, many years ago. By a race now vanished."

The small captain looked excited.

"Many years? A—a *ber-oo* race, perhaps?"

Now it was the doctor whose eyes widened.

"Blue! Did you say a *blue* race?"

"But, yes!" answered the Jap. "Everyone knew that long ago there dwelt on earth the blue-skinned gods. The legends of my peoples speak of them," he said. "The *Kojiki* tells how they brought to mankind wisdom, and—" he continued serenely—"when they departed, it was ordained that my people should henceforth rule the world."

Dr. Aiken had completely forgotten, now, why the Jap was here. This was another precious piece fitting the jigsaw puzzle he was striving to put together. He cried to Lake and Ramey. "Hear that? In the *Kojiki*, too! The ancient Japanese Book of Records!

That makes four places I've found reference to blue ones.* The Hindu folklore tells of them; the Druidic ritual worships blue warriors. I tell you, lads, Angkor is a vital link in the chain of Man's past! We *must* find a way to read the writing. When we do—"

Then his words died abruptly. A call had risen from across the moat. Soldiers, standing at the edge of the cane-grove, were gesturing, shouting. As he listened, the smiling captain ceased to smile; Dr. Aiken, who apparently understood at least part of the message, glanced suddenly, worriedly, at Ramey. In an undertone he breathed, "Your airplane! They've found it! And—and somehow they know you're one of—Hurry! We've got to get out of here!"

He tugged at Ramey's sleeve. But even as they edged away, the little captain turned, his eyes hard and angry, his friendliness vanished.

"A moment, please! You have lied to me. Halt! Or it is necessary to—"

His revolver was already halfway out of its holster. But swiftly as he moved, Lake O'Brien was even quicker. With a sudden twist, Lake wrenched the gun from his hand, put a leg behind his knees and shoved violently. The small captain went sprawling and—

"Come on!" cried Lake, "up to the temple."

He cried a needless warning. For even as he shouted, the Jap leader's voice screamed a shrill command. Soldiers came running from every section of the court, and the brooding silence of Angkor was shattered with the sharp explosive crack of a modern rifle.

In that moment, when it seemed impossible the racing four could cover four hundred vulnerable yards, relief came from an unexpected source. From around the corner of the temple charged

* Follows another reference which would have interested Dr. Aiken:

"I accept that, in the past . . . inhabitants of other worlds have—dropped here, hopped here, wafted, sailed, flown, motored—walked here, for all I know—been pulled here, been pushed; have come singly, have come in enormous numbers; have visited occasionally, have visited periodically for hunting, trading, replenishing harems, mining; have been unable to stay here, have established colonies here; have been lost here; far-advanced peoples, or things, and primitive peoples or whatever they were: white ones, black ones, yellow ones—

"I have a very convincing datum that the ancient Britons were blue ones. Of course we are told by anthropologists that they only painted themselves blue, but in our own advanced anthropology, they were veritable blue ones—

"*Annals of Philosophy*, 14-51: Note of a blue child born in England. That's atavism!"—from *The Book of the Damned*, by Charles Fort.—Ed.

two uniformed warriors of Nippon. Beyond them lay temporary safety but—how to pass them? Already one was raising rifle to shoulder, his finger tense on the trigger. Then from the building itself snarled the bark of an automatic. The Jap jerked as though sledged with the blow of an invisible ramrod. His jaw dropped suddenly and the gun flew clattering from his hands as he doubled and pitched forward. Then another shot from the same source; another, and yet another. The familiar voice of Red Barrett boomed from the portico.

“Keep coming, keed! We’re covering you!”

Four hundred yards is a meager distance, but it seemed like miles. Ramey Winters gasped to his comrades, “Duck! Zigzag! Bad target!” and set the example, hunching, shifting his course like a frightened crab, as he scuttled for the gateway.

His own pistol was in his hands. He used it once to take a flying potshot at a brown-clad figure emerging on an upper terrace, and had the satisfaction of seeing the figure duck hastily out of sight, howling with pain and dismay as the riflestock splintered in his hands.

Lake, too, was emptying his commandeered pistol at such targets as presented themselves. With what success Ramey had no time to judge, for a bedlam of gunfire howled about them now; hot lead glanced screaming off ancient stone.

How they won through that maelstrom of seething death, Ramey could not afterward say. He was only conscious of his own plunging motion, dimly aware that all three of his companions were still on their feet and racing forward with him. Once a puff of glittering powder leaped from the causeway inches before him, and coarse, stony granules lashed his face stingingly. Once a voice beside him grunted, and glancing up he saw that Lake O’Brien’s shirt was redly plastered to his shoulder.

Then suddenly the heat of the day, the dancing sunlight, were gone. Grateful murkiness engulfed them, and friendly hands tugged them to shelter. Red Barrett’s voice bellowed in his ear, “Nice, going, pal! I thought for a minute you wouldn’t make it. Them damn yellow devils!”

Then a cooler, grimmer voice crisped orders. “No place to stop. This spot’s too vulnerable. They’ll shoot us down like trapped rats. Below, everybody!”

And again they were running, this time down a shadowy ramp to the entrails of the temple, to the bulwarked suite of chambers wherein Dr. Aiken had established his headquarters. Behind them the *spang!* of rifle fire died away, but there followed them down

the corridor the shrill cry of the Japanese captain rallying his men.

Dr. Aiken seized a moment of respite to offer thanks.

"You saved our lives, boys," he panted. "But—but how did you happen to be up there? I ordered you to stay below—"

"It was *his* idea," claimed Red.

Syd O'Brien grunted gloomily, "Knew there'd be trouble. Got out the guns. Left Johnny with Sheila. Figured Red and I better go topside to make sure everything was all right."

His brother chuckled appreciatively. "Well, this was once your dismal hunches paid off, Cassandra.* Now wait a minute, Sheila—don't get excited!"

They had reached their refuge. From it Sheila Aiken rushed forward to greet them, exclaiming at the twin's wound. "You're shot, Lake! What happened? Did they—?"

"I'm all right," Lake assured her. "Just barely grazed me. Everybody in? Watch that door, Ramey. What happened? Why, those damned, stinking little Japs spotted Ramey's plane, that's what."

"But we knew there was a possibility they might do that," said the girl. "That's why we dressed Red and Ramey as members of our party. Why should that cause them to—?"

Dr. Aiken said gravely, "I can't understand it myself, Sheila. But somehow the soldiers learned Ramey was one of the aviators. That's what they called to their captain. Wait a minute! What's that? I hear footsteps!"

"It's all right," called Syd. "It's just Johnny. He's got Sheng-ti with him. This way, Johnny. You all right? Where've you been?"

Grinnell entered, his face serious. "I ducked down to the digs when the shooting started, told the workmen to head for Pnom-Penh, get a message to the consul there. Lake! Your shoulder!"

"Only a flesh wound. Where did he come from?"

"Sheng-ti? Oh, I bumped into him in the causeway. I told him to beat it but he insisted on shuffling along. Look, Sheng-ti, you'd better get out of here. This is bad. Trouble. Danger. Savvy?"

The *bonze* was paying no attention to him. His eyes had lighted upon Ramey Winters. Now he raised both arms high above his head in a jeremiad gesture. His voice rolled stridently through

* Cassandra, daughter of King Priam of Troy, was said to have been loved by the god Apollo, who gave her the gift of prophecy. But afterward, offended with her, he rendered the gift unavailing by ordaining that her predictions should never be believed!—*Ed.*

the vaulted chambers. "Aiee! Doom! Doom! When the bird man drops from the skies—"

"Very well, Sheng-ti. That will do," Dr. Aiken silenced him curtly. He turned to the others, frowning. "Well, there's your answer."

"Answer?"

"How the Japs found out about Ramey. Sheng-ti must have shouted his mad prophecies in their hearing, pointed Ramey out. Well, what's done is done. We might as well make the best of it."

Ramey's brows were knotted anxiously. "This has gone far enough, Dr. Aiken. Red and I can't stay here a minute longer. We've gotten you into trouble as it is. We're pulling out, *now!*"

The archeologist shook his head. "Thanks, boy, but it's no use. We're all in the same boat now. Have been ever since we defied their orders, returned their fire. They're resentful little beasts, the Japs. And don't condemn yourself. It's not altogether your fault. Our work here was finished the day they marched into Indo-China. If it hadn't been this they would have found other excuses to close in on us.

"No, the only thing we can do now is hold the fort. Try to defend ourselves until one of the coolies gets word to the American consul about what's going on up here. And I'm afraid our future actions will be determined entirely by our little yellow friends. Whether it is to be truce or war is a decision they must make—"

"A decision," interrupted Syd O'Brien from the vantage point over which he stood guard, "they've already made. It's war, Doctor! Because here they come now!"

CHAPTER V

Flight

It was not strange that in this moment of peril, when the chips were down, Ramey Winters should be the one to seize the reins of command. He was a soldier, a trained fighting man. It was sheer instinct that spurred him into action. Once, several hours before, he had studied this room with the wondering eyes of one baffled by mystery. Now he studied it again, this time with the sharp, critical gaze of a fighter appraising a salient.

The hall in which they stood was a closed square, roughly, fifty by fifty, on the lowest level of the temple. Its walls were two feet thick, and it had no windows, but it was still precariously vulnerable because at the center of each of three walls gaped wide,

arched doorways, and the fourth wall was fed by a smaller entrance.

Ramey asked swiftly, "These doorways—where do they lead?"

Syd O'Brien pointed to each in turn. "North wall—outer staircases from the moat. West wall—terrace. The south entrance is the way we came in. The little door leads to the inner court. They'll come from the west and south."

"Okay. That's where we'll concentrate our defense. Red—you and Lake and Dr. Aiken guard the west entrance. Syd and Grinnell and I will hold the south."

"How about me?" demanded Sheila Aiken angrily. "I'm as good a shot as—"

"You have the most important job of all," Ramey told her grimly. "Keeping the guns loaded for us. Put all the guns and ammunition on the table between us. Here—" With a heave he cleared the surface of a massive laboratory desk. Dr. Aiken winced as piles of carefully sorted ceramics, heaps of precious notes, spilled helter-skelter to the floor. "Sirabhar will help you. I suppose we can't count on Sheng-ti. No? Then you and Sirabhar will have to keep an eye on the north and east entrances. Not much chance of their getting in that way, but—"

Red said, "Lot of furniture in this room, Ramey. Chairs and tables and stuff. Make good barricades."

"Good idea!" All right, everybody, hop to it! Time's getting short."

Time was getting short. So treacherously short, in fact, that working feverishly they had barely succeeded in setting the rude beginning of their barricades before the vulnerable doorways when the attackers hove into view. Johnny Grinnell gave the alarm.

"Here they come, Ramey! Around the edge of the terrace wall. Six . . . a dozen of them. I don't see the captain, though."

"You won't," bellowed Red. "'Cause he's over here. They done what you figured, Ramey; split up. They're coming at us from both sides. Well—"

"Wait!" snapped Ramey. "Don't shoot unless they do!"

Red lowered his rifle reluctantly. "Damn if you ain't the—the *pacifcest* guy I ever saw! Always letting the other guy get the drop on you. It gives me a pain in the—*Wow!* There it comes! Well, I can shoot, *now!*"

For his sentence had been punctuated by a simultaneous opening fire from both attack parties. His own gun barked answer. And this time, more ruthlessly, more determinedly than it had waged before the battle begun on the upper causeway continued.

There was no time for the details of that fight to register coherently upon Ramey Winter's brain. But later he found etched in his memory sharp, indelible highlights of those frenzied moments.

His own gun, spluttering and coughing against his cheek as he crouched at the edge of the doorway, firing at figures that slipped, wraithlike, through the murky corridor. The incessant, crashing echo of what seemed like a thousand guns; here in these vaulted depths sound smashed back upon itself thunderously, seemed to merge with the thickening, acrid smoke and roll about the room in reverberant waves. Red Barrett, holding his heavy rifle pistol-wise in one hamlike paw, dripping curses in a loud, prolific stream as with his free hand he tucked into place the edge of a raveling bandage. Syd O'Brien, scowling at his side, methodically pumping his shots where they would do the most good. Lake O'Brien, across the room, achieving the same result with roars of boisterous glee.

Other details. Dr. Aiken's plaintive moan rising above the crash of gunfire. "Those carvings! Those priceless carvings! Ruined!"

A glimpse of Sheila Aiken, an angel yet, but an avenging angel now; face smudged and sweating, white hands flying like shuttles as she reloaded the hot, empty rifles and lined them again within reach of the fighters.

The whining sing-song of Sheng-ti, stalking up and down the room, invoking something of his placid, contemplative god; whether a blessing or a curse Ramey could not tell.

Then Sheila's voice rose, shrill, alarmed. "Johnny! Ramey! At the court gate!"

Ramey spun to the small east doorway, rifle leveled. But even as his sights centered on a yellow face, Syd O'Brien's arm knocked up his gun. The bullet gouged flecks from a priceless mosaic. "Don't! It's Tomasaki! Call him, Sirabhar! Get him to help!"

Sirabhar slipped from table to doorway, called to his companion in their native tongue. An answer quavered back, highpitched with terror. Sirabhar turned.

"He say he no dare, Master sahib. He say he do not wish to fight the Little Ones. They too many and too strong."

There was anger and contempt in the loyal aide's voice. He called again to his fellow-countryman, his words a liquid blur in the tumult. An answer piped back. Sirabhar's small frame stiffened, his soft brown eyes were suddenly dark bits of flinty shale. His face contorted; he spat into the gloom and whirled to Dr. Aiken, his voice shrill, accusing:

"Tomosaki no good friend, Master Doctor. Him coward. Him—"

His words ended suddenly. Too suddenly. Ramey, who had turned again to the defense of his post, risked a backward glance—and was in time to see the staunch little Cambodian reel and topple forward, clutching, with fingers that seemed to spurt blood, at a gaping hole in his chest. Sheila screamed, and beside Ramey, Syd O'Brien growled a thick curse. They were the brown man's obsequies. He was dead before he hit the floor.

But there was no time to mourn him now. For Barrett, who had swung from doorway to table for a recharged weapon, roared suddenly, "The ammunition! Is that all we have left?"

The girl nodded. "That's all here. There's more in storage, but—"

Ramey, sweeping the table with a glance, saw that their supply had dwindled to a lone container of cartridges. Enough to account for every one of their attackers, yes—if every shot could be trusted to take its toll. But with six people firing steadily, indiscriminately, against a diverse attack—

"We can't defend this place any longer," he roared. "They'll take us in five minutes. Too many entrances. Doc, is there any other—?"

It was Lake who answered. "Yes! That underground chamber I found. It has only one entrance. One armed man could defend that for a week."

"But—can we get there?" asked Ramey.

"Through the court exit," responded Lake.

"That's the ticket, then," shouted Ramey. "Lake, you lead the way. Then Sheila and Dr. Aiken. Somebody grab Sheng-ti and take him along. They'll murder him if we leave him behind. Ready, everybody? Go, now. Orderly. We'll all make it."

There came one contradictory voice. Out of a sudden, ominous hush that descended as briefly no rifle anywhere was barking, came the faint, dissenting voice of Johnny Grinnell. "Not . . . all of us, Winters."

Ramey, swiveling, saw with horror that the youngster was no longer on his feet. He lay asprawl on the hard stone floor behind the barricade. His rifle was still clenched in one white-knuckled hand, but his other hand gripped his belt as if to stifle a gnawing fire there. And the fingers of that hand were dark with a slowly spreading stain.

In a flash Ramey was on his knees beside the younger man. Dr. Aiken, too, and Sheila.

"Johnny, what's the matter? You're not—"

Grinnell tried to grin. An unfortunate attempt, for with the effort suddenly he coughed and the corners of his lips leaked blood. He spat and shook his head angrily. "Lucky . . . shot! But I guess it did . . . the trick."

"You'll be okay," Ramey told him gruffly. "Barrett! Syd! Give me a hand here—"

But even as he gave the order his eyes found Dr. Aiken's, and the old man's head shook slowly from side to side. His lips formed soundless words. "No use, Ramey."

The voice of Grinnell echoed. "It's no . . . use, Ramey. I was a med student once." His eyes hardened to a granite doggedness. "You others . . . beat it! Get out of here while . . . you can!" Again a paroxysm of coughing seized him. When it ended his shirtfront was not pretty. He wiped at his lips with a grimy forearm, cried feverishly, "Get out . . . damn it! Get out . . . I say!"

Then a sudden thought struck him. He turned to Ramey. "No, wait! Lift me . . . to the doorway there—"

Red spoke warningly from the west entrance. "They're closing in, Ramey. I think they're going to rush the joint."

Ramey bent, raised, and cradling the mortally wounded Grinnell in his arms like a gangling child, carried him to the spot he had begged to be taken. Grinnell's lips twitched in a feeble smile. "This is . . . swell. Now give me a . . . rifle, Winters . . . and get the hell . . . out of here. All of you."

Ramey looked at Aiken—the doctor nodded. One by one they abandoned their posts, slipped into the narrow corridor beyond the prostrate figure. Sheila was sobbing softly. Syd O'Brien's face was a mask of pain and rage; even Lake was grim as he stopped to wring Grinnell's hand in last farewell.

Only over Grinnell's white lips hovered the ghost of a smile. Ramey and Dr. Aiken were the last to pass him. He searched their faces with eyes already uncertain. "Don't worry about me . . . Doc," he whispered. "Just get even." A shudder trembled through him; he drew a faltering breath. "Wish I could go with you . . . though. It's a strange journey . . . you're going on. A strange journey . . ."

Dr. Aiken tapped his forehead significantly. "Delirium," he whispered.

Then Red's voice boomed from the background. "Ramey! Doc! Come on! They'll be busting through in a minute."

And he was right. Already figures were closing in on the abandoned barricade. Ramey gripped the old man's arm, propelled him by sheer force down the corridor. They had covered

perhaps a hundred yards when they heard the lone, explosive crack of a rifle, Johnny's rifle. Then another shot then a volley. Then silence . . .

Their way led them from wide corridors to smaller ones, then down a slow ramp to a passageway narrower still and almost completely lightless. The only illumination came through squares of stone fretwork high on the walls.

Ramey judged they were below ground level now. Sheila Aiken, behind whom he stumbled, verified his guess.

"We're beneath the main altar room. Ventilation ducts at bases of statues there. That's how Lake discovered this place."

Then abruptly they turned a corner and the subterranean chamber lay before them. It, unlike any of the other chambers Ramey had seen at Angkor Wat, was doored with a great barrier of bronze. They tumbled into the room, Syd O'Brien and Tomasaki, Red Barrett and the still bleating *bonze*, Sheng-ti, Lake and Sheila, Ramey and Dr. Aiken bringing up the rear. Ramey shut the huge door after them, clanged into place a ponderous lock-bar, and with a sigh of relief, turned to view his new surroundings.

This was a small room, barely more than twenty feet on a side and of equal height. A pallid light filtered down from a grilled mosaic at roof level. Lake O'Brien augmented this illumination by igniting a flambeau ensconced on the wall. The torch crackled and flamed high, casting a fitful, tawny gleam over carven walls, and—something else. The object Dr. Aiken had mentioned. The inexplicable cube of wrought metal standing in the middle of the room.

Ramey stared at the thing incredulously.

"Why, that—that thing's *modern*!"

Dr. Aiken nodded somberly. "By all laws of reason and logic," he assented, "it should be. But its location and the inscriptions argue differently, Winters."

Ramey tapped the thing with his pistol. It echoed metallically, hollowly. "But the ancients didn't know how to work with metals like this. This isn't silver or brass or even iron. It's—it's steel!"

"Guess again," grunted Syd. "It's not even steel. We haven't been able to figure *what* it is. Some unknown alloy."

He was, Ramey thought suddenly, getting almost as bad as Dr. Aiken. Fretting over archeological problems at a time like this. He abandoned the question for the time being.

"Well, no time to worry about it now. We've given the Japs the slip for the time being, but we're still not out of the woods. Now that we're down here, what do we do next?"

Lake grinned at him. "We sit," he said, "tight. And wait for them to get tired of looking for us. We hightailed it down here so fast, Ramey, you probably didn't notice the passageway we came through was a veritable labyrinth. It took me months to locate this place, and *then* I only stumbled across it by accident. The Japs are nervous, impatient little devils. They'll never find us here. In a few hours, a day at the most, they'll decide we must have somehow escaped from the temple grounds, beat it back to ask their base commandant what they should do next. When we're sure they're gone, we'll lam out of here."

"Sounds good. Meanwhile, what do we do about food and drinking water?"

"We do without, I guess," admitted Lake.

For the first time since their flight from the room above, the little native spoke up.

"Excuse, please, Master sahib, sir. *I* will go topside. Bring back food and water."

Ramey stared at him in astonishment. A little while ago Tomasaki had been limp with terror. Now he was offering to take a foolhardy risk on their behalf. It didn't make sense. The little man had undergone a complete change of heart or—

Suddenly Ramey thought he understood. For his keen gaze detected jittering nerves in the native's hopeful offer. The rising intonation of Sheng-ti—supplied the missing clue.

"*Aiee! Doom!*" the shaven *bonze* was crying. "Woe to all men when the chamber of change be violated; when the gods of the past shall walk!"

Lake, too, understood, and stopped the little man as he edged toward the doorway. "No, come back here, Tomasaki! It's too risky. They might see you." He grinned at his friends. "I don't know how the rest of you feel, but me, I'd rather have an empty belly than a full carcass."

Red Barrett had been staring in awed wonderment at the mysterious metal cube ever since Ramey had tapped it. Red was a great guy, but he was not the world's fastest thinker. Now comprehension seemed to dawn on him with an almost audible sound of gears meshing. He said to Ramey, "Hey, Ramey! That thing's *hollow!*"

Dr. Aiken said, "Yes, Barrett, we know that. But so far we have been unable to find any way to open it."

Red started to scratch his brick pate automatically, winced as his hand touched bandages. "You know what? I bet I know what that thing is. I seen a picture once, back in the States. Bela Lugosi in *The Wife of the Werewolf*. He was one of them whacky scien-

tists—'scuse me, Doc—and he had a cabinet something like this. Only it really wasn't no cabinet at all. It was a secret entrance to an underground tunnel.

"I betcha that's what this is, too. A passageway which goes down under the moat, maybe, and out beyond the temple. Them old priests used to be keen on things like that. Course they didn't mess around with keys or nothing. They had trick doors you had to work out on like an osteopath. Like you'd punch on this little knob here, and maybe wriggle this hunk of carving—*Holy cow!* Lookit, Ramey!"

He leaped back, startled. Nor was he the only one whose jaw dropped in sudden wonder. Call it coincidence, call it Fate, call it an incredible permutation of chance—but while explaining, Red's fingers had fumbled upon the combination required to unlock the gate of this ancient mystery. With a groan of protest, one outer face of the strange cube was swinging open!

CHAPTER VI

Across Time

Red Barrett was the first to break the silence that blanketed the little group.

"See, Ramey?" he cried. "Look at that! What did I tell you! Now, I bet there's steps in that thing. A trapdoor or something."

But womanlike, it was Sheila Aiken who, obeying the Pandora impulse, stepped forward into the open cubicle. Darkness swallowed her like an engulfing maw. Dr. Aiken cried out in swift alarm, "Sheila! Be careful!"

Her voice came back, excited but unfearful, "I'm all right, Daddy. And—Barrett was right! There *is* a ladder in here. But it goes up instead of down! Come and bring the torch! This is the *strangest room!*"

Syd had already torn the flambeau from its bracket. Now he and the others crowded forward eagerly into the metal chamber. But if they had hoped a view of its interior would solve their questions, they were doomed to disillusionment. For the mystery of the cube was heightened, rather than decreased, by that which the flickering torch revealed.

An interior fashioned and equipped like a small room; for all the world, Ramey thought confusedly, like one of those efficiently compact cabins on ocean liners. A metal bench or working table. Two wooden chair frames, now seatless. In one corner a stiff

pallet. Everywhere mouldering dust that fumed upward as their feet scuffed the floor; dust that must be, Rainey realized suddenly, the detritus of ages. The wheezy puff they had heard as the door swung open was proof that the cubicle was nearly airtight. That which eddied about them now, tickling their nostrils, must be the dust of less permanent materials than metal and wood, disintegrated by slow years. Those whorls beneath the seatless chairs might once have been rush or tapestry; the thick, powdery fluff on the pallet be the residue of vanished bedsilks.

But it was foolish to conjecture on things vanished when so many tangible wonders greeted the eye. For as Sheila had said, a ladder climbed the near wall to the ceiling; on the wall before one of the chairs was a panel, and on this panel—

Ramey's eyes bulged.

"Doctor!" he cried. "Those dials! Those levers!"

Dr. Aiken was staring at the panel like one who sees a lifetime of reason and learning collapse before him. "I—I can't understand it!" he stammered weakly. "Machinery? But the ancients had no knowledge—"

Ramey, moving forward, kicked something. He bent and picked it up. It was as incomprehensible as the panel. It was a metal arch about three feet long, supported by a crossbrace upon which was mounted a sealed cylinder, also of metal. The instrument was equipped with a rest carven to fit the shoulder. Its semi-circular portion was pierced on the outer rim at one-eighth inch intervals with tiny holes, and where the hoop joined the cylinder there were what seemed to be two handgrips equipped with finger studs.

Instinctively Ramey raised it to his shoulder. It balanced like an archer's crossbow, except that it had neither stock nor projectile grooves. That it was a weapon of some sort he had no doubt. An impulse stirred him to press the stud beneath his trigger finger, but he subdued it. It would be folly to test a weapon of unguessed nature in such confined quarters.

In this weird moment he had forgotten everything save his own excitement. Now a cry dragged him back from the world of wonder to the world of actuality.

"The door!" roared Lake O'Brien, "It's closing!"

Whirling, Ramey saw the unguarded metal shield swinging shut. With a hoarse cry he leaped toward it. His shoulder and that of Lake smashed it at the same time. But the bruising impact was in vain. Even as they struck it there came the *snick!* of clasping locks. They were sealed in the metal cube. And Syd O'Brien's voice told why.

"It didn't close!" roared Syd. "It was closed *on* us—intentionally! Tomasaki!"

Ramey, glancing about him, realized that of their number all were present but the little brown man. Suspicion, latent until now, flared into sudden understanding.

"Then *he's* the one! The one who showed the Japs the 'plane, told them who I was! He's been with them since the beginning. Sneaked around to betray us at the east gate, and probably shot Sirabhar himself when Sirabhar tried to warn us."

Lake boomed, "By God! That's why he offered to go after supplies! So he could reveal our hiding place. He's probably gone to fetch the Japs now, the traitorous little—"

As ever, Dr. Aiken's head was levellest in a crisis.

"There are Quislings in all races," he said sadly. "It's too bad we discovered the enemy in our midst so late. But we have no time to waste in recriminations. We must get out of here before the soldiers come. The ladder—where does it go?"

Red had mounted the rungs, was fumbling above him. Now he called down, "It's a trap-door of some kind, Doc. Just a minute and— Ouch! This damn catch is stuck. There it comes—*oh-oh!*"

Hastily he let drop back into place the yard-square sheet of metal he had pried open. Ramey looked at him anxiously. "What's the matter, Redhead?"

"This thing opens right smack into the main altar room," whispered Barrett. "There's a bunch of Japs up there snooping around. They almost seen me."

"Then we—we're trapped?" asked Sheila faintly.

Ramey's eyes narrowed. "Not yet! That trap door gives us a chance. When Tomasaki leads the Japs down here, emptying the courts above, we'll beat it out that way!"

He glanced at Dr. Aiken commiseratingly. "Tough luck, Doc! Just when you make the greatest find of your career, we have to duck out. But maybe someday we can come back and figure out this mystery. Meanwhile we ought to try to find some way to lock this door from the inside. Tomasaki's just clever and treacherous enough to have seen how Red opened it. We've got to try to stall the Japs for an hour or so to give us a head start. One of these levers might be the answer."

He stared at the wall panel dubiously. Dr. Ian Aiken said, "I don't know, Ramey. It's foolhardy to experiment with things we don't understand. I'd be careful if I were you."

"It's now or never," Ramey reminded him. "In a few minutes it'll be too late to experiment."

He stepped toward the largest of several levers. As he did so a shrill cry sounded behind him. A mournful cry of terror.

"*Aiee!* Out of the chamber of the past comes doom! Doom to the men of the earth and of not-earth!"

"Will somebody please gag that perambulating wailing-wall?" demanded Ramey irately. "All right, everybody—look sharp! I'm going to try it easy. If you see anything happening, holler! And be careful no trap doors open beneath you. Okay! Here we go!"

He laid his hand on the upright strip of metal and pulled it slowly toward him. But nothing happened. So long had it rested unused that it seemed welded to the plate on which it stood. Ramey tried again, more forcibly. Still no result. He hunched his shoulders, took a good grip. This time he wrenched at the lever with every ounce of power in his six-foot frame. And—The rod gave suddenly, jolting back in its groove, burying its handle in the pit of Ramey's stomach, jarring the wind out of him. Ramey sat down, abruptly. A startled "*Ooph!*" burst from his lips. Then as he caught his wind, a grin overspread his features. "Did it!" he claimed triumphantly. Then as he stared about him, seeing no change in either the room or his companions' expressions, his eyebrows raised. "But now that I did it," he demanded plaintively, "what did I do?"

"You pulled a little stick," said Red genially. "Only nothing happened. I'll give you a recommend if you ever need one. Chief stick-puller and nothing-happened."

But one at least did not share his mirth. "Wait!" Sheila Aiken cried suddenly. "Something *did* happen! Listen—a humming noise—"

It was so. Singing so faintly through the cubicle as to be almost inaudible was the thin, far moan as of a diminutive motor heard from a vast distance. And where Ramey's hand touched the floor, he thought he could detect just the faintest, the barest, tingle of vibration coursing through the metal. Nor was this just an hallucination. Because—

"It *is* a motor!" cried Dr. Aiken. "We must be moving! For, see? The panel!"

Ramey's eyes followed the archeologist's finger. On the curious instrument panel before them was a circular dial. And the pointer of this dial was slowly revolving!

Red Barrett, who had clambered down the ladder, took one startled look at the spinning needle and started up again. "Excuse me, folks," he gulped, "I just remembered I got to see a guy about

nine million miles away from here!" His hands fumbled for the latch of the ceiling trap door.

Dr. Aiken stayed him with a sharp command. "No, Red! Don't!"

"H-huh? Why not?"

"Because something is happening to us. Obviously, we are moving in some direction or other. It might be perfectly safe to open that trap door, but on the other hand—well, I think it would be better to wait until the needle reaches the end of its circuit."

"If you ask me," vouchsafed Syd O'Brien gloomily, "we've probably marched ourselves right into some sort of ancient torture chamber. An Iron Maiden, or something like that. We'll probably end up under the moat or being cooked in boiling mud—" He stared about him suspiciously. "Do these walls look like they're closing in on us?"

His brother chuckled. "Cheerful little cherub, isn't he? I agree with the doctor; you shouldn't open that trap door just yet, Barrett. But I don't think we're in any danger. Evidently this chamber was a secret of the ancient priesthood. They wouldn't build anything to hurt themselves. Wherever it's taking us—"

"Taking us?" interrupted Ramey. "What's all this talk about movement? We don't seem to be going anywhere."

Dr. Aiken permitted himself a thin smile. "Spoken like a true airman, Ramey. I'm afraid your profession has accustomed you to judge motion by external appearances. Within this closed chamber we have no object relative to which we can judge speed or direction. But by the hum of the motors, movement of these several dials, it is perfectly obvious we are doing *something*. Just what, I cannot say." Here a frown flickered across the forehead of the older man. "It is quite true that if we move either up or down there should be a visceral sensation similar to that experienced in elevators. Similarly, were we moving in a lateral direction we should have felt the shock of overbalanced inertia when we started in one or another direction. Since we did not feel these things there is only one other possibility, but it is so fantastic—"

"It ain't fantastic," broke in Red Barrett. "It's whacky. We ain't going up or down; we ain't going sideways. That's all the directions there is."

"All the *common* directions known to man," corrected Dr. Aiken slowly. "There is one other about which we know absolutely nothing. A direction of flight which is, as best, but a mathematical concept—"

This time Sheila Aiken stared at her father. "Daddy, it's unbelievable. You can't mean—?"

"I venture no opinion," said the old man mildly. "I am simply trying to apply to a most unusual situation the rules of logic."

Ramey gave up. He looked at the girl helplessly.

"What does he mean, Sheila?"

There was equal helplessness, and for the first time, an expression of uncertainty, in the girl's eyes as she answered. "He means—we may be moving across Time, Ramey!"

"Time!" For a moment Ramey was jarred completely out of his self-possession. Then his sense of humor came to his rescue. "Oh, come now! We *are* letting ourselves go hogwild! It's been a hell of a day, I know. And we've had some unnerving experiences, but—*Time!*"

Syd O'Brien did not share his scorn. The more sober twin nodded moodily. "Nevertheless, it's a possibility, Winters. Time is a dimension just as truly as height, breadth, depth. Some have called it the Fourth Dimension and evolved the concept of a Space-Time continuum wherein all things past and present exist side by side. Even the man-in-the-street acknowledges the dimension of Time in his every day life. When he says he will meet a friend at Broad and Main Streets, his directions are inadequate unless he specifies the *floor*, for if he is on the tenth floor and his friend waits at ground level they will not meet. The third dimension, height, must be taken into consideration.

"Similarly, if he tells his friend he will meet him on the tenth floor of a building at Broad and Main, and he is there at ten o'clock but his friend does not arrive until two, they will still not meet—for they did not take into consideration the Fourth extension, Time."

"I understand that," acknowledged Ramey impatiently. "But to speak of *crossing* Time or 'traveling through' Time—that's absurd. Sheer nonsense for imaginative fictioneers to toy with."

The old scientist stared at him quizzically. "I wish I could be as sure of that as you, Ramey. Unfortunately, science is forced to admit too many contradictory points of evidence to make such bold statements. I might mention the strange case of the two Twentieth Century American lady-tourists who, strolling in the gardens at Versailles, found themselves suddenly translated, incomprehensibly face to face with members of the Eighteenth Century royal French Court. This record is, unhappily, too well authenticated to ignore. I might also point to the accuracy of the

prophecies of Michel de Nostradamus who claimed that by means of his magic he was able to move forward into the future and see those things which were to be.*

"Many other instances. An Italian record of a stranger who appeared mysteriously in Sicily some two hundred years ago in a machine, the description of which shows a marked resemblance to a rocket-propelled airship. Legend relates that this wise man, who spoke a curiously distorted English, made his home with the natives for several months, taught them new and better methods of husbandry, instructed them in the construction of mechanical devices, and stayed an incipient plague by medical means unknown to that era."

"Still," expostulated Ramey, "to travel across Time—"

"As a hazard," pursued the old man, "let us suppose the continuum of Space-Time may be likened to a huge volume in which is inscribed all the history of past, present, and future. All things are written there—*all*. From man's darkest beginnings till the last feeble flutter of a dying sun stills in cold death a forlorn earth. Man, reading this volume, must perforce turn the pages one by one. He has memory of that which he has read, comprehension of that upon which his eyes presently rest—but no knowledge whatsoever of what lies before.

"But there is another pathway through this volume. The creeping pathway of the bookworm. This is the shortest route between era and era. Through this infinitesimal tunnel the bookworm—or let us say a 'time machine' constructed by one who knows the manner of its making—can skip from epoch to epoch in the twinkling of an eye."

Ramey stared at him incredulously. "And you—you think this thing we're in may be a sort of mechanical bookworm piercing the pages of Time?"

"I do not know," Dr. Aiken told him again. "I simply point out that at least hypothetically these things could be. I do not

* Michel de Nostradamus most amazing of all prophets, not only accurately forecast major world events for many hundreds of years but supplemented his prophecies with the exact dates as well as the names of persons and places involved. So highly is he regarded on the continent that at the outbreak of World War II, more than five new editions of his book, *The Prophetic Centuries*, were rushed into print to supply the demand of Frenchmen eager to learn the outcome of the new strife.

Unhappily the prophecies of Nostradamus suffered the fate of those of Cassandra. Few believed his statements that France would be betrayed from within, Paris fall, and the greater part of the nation be occupied by German forces.—*Ed.*

know; no. But we will learn in a minute. For, see? The needle has stopped. And if I am not mistaken, the humming, too, has ended.”

He pointed. The moving needle had indeed completed its circuit and come to rest; the vibration was gone. Whatever had been the nature of the metal chamber’s movements, it was motionless now. Red fidgeted impatiently above them.

“All right now, Doc? Okay for me to lift the trap now?”

“Yes. By all means, Barrett.”

Red raised the trap-door gingerly. But no sunlight filtered into the inch-wide slit. He lifted it still farther, glanced anxiously down at his companions. “Hey, lookit! This is funny! It’s dark! No, wait a minute—there’s a little spot of light. And there’s *another* wall here and *another* ladder.”

“Give him the torch, Syd,” cried Dr. Aiken. “There . . . Got it, Barrett? Go on up. Climb the ladder. See if you can find out where we are, and what—”

The flaming brand bobbed upward ten, twenty feet, for a few seconds weaved in uncertain circles, its light reflecting to those below only a gray formlessness and the foreshortened outlines of the climbing Barrett. Then:

“Ramey! Doc!” cried Red.

“What is it?”

“Come on up here, everybody, quick! Look! There’s a platform up here and a couple of peepholes, and—and it’s the damndest thing you ever seen. We ain’t moved an inch. We’re still in the temple. But—but it ain’t empty now. There’s about three billion people gathered in it!”

CHAPTER VII

Gods of the Jungle

Red’s hyperbole achieved at least one result. That of creating an immediate scramble for the ladder. Within a very few minutes all the party, including even the muttering Sheng-ti, had joined him on the platform before the circular openings he had mentioned. Of these there were approximately a dozen, spaced at irregular intervals around the chamber in which they now found themselves. Ramey, standing beside the girl Sheila, stared down upon a sight to stagger the wildest imagination.

He looked from an elevated vantage post out across a tremendous hall of Angkor Wat. But there was a subtle difference

between this room and those which Dr. Aiken had shown him hours—or was it centuries—ago? At first Ramey could not name that change. Then, with a start, he realized what it was.

Everything looked newer, cleaner, brighter. The pillars supporting the high, vaulted roof were more sharply incised, the carving more clearly cut, undulled by the leveling file of age. Furthermore, not just a few, but *all* the murals, the carvings, the multifold bits of statuary were painted, not in dull, faded hues, but in gaudy color, freshly radiant!

These things were evidence enough that a change had been wrought in their lives. But if anyone needed more, the court below stirred with *living* proof. "Three billion" was a typical Barrett estimate, but there were, Ramey saw swiftly, easily three, perhaps four hundred people gathered in the altar room.

And *what* people! From every lurking corner of earth they must have sprung. Ramey gasped to indentify representatives of every race, creed and color known to man. For the most part they were Asiatics, saffron of skin, oblique-eyed. But here stood a little group of gigantic Nubians, ebony-hued and strong, draped in jewel-encrusted girdles of samite; over there gathered a band two-score strong of goldenhaired, pale-fleshed warriors, fur-garbed and armed with gleaming halberds; elsewhere, anxiously whispering amongst themselves, huddled a knot of dark-haired, hawk-nosed captains with rich beards that curled to their breasts!

Dr. Aiken whispered hoarsely, "Then—then it is true! We *have* traversed Time! Come back to the period of Angkor's glory. For, see? Syd, those bearded men—"

"Assyrians," acknowledged Syd O'Brien, "or I'm stark, staring mad. But—but that means, Doctor, Angkor is centuries older than we thought. Their era was around 2500 B.C."

Red Barrett gulped, "You mean that there bellywash you was talking a little while ago is *true*? We actually have come back through Time? I don't believe it!"

"I know just how you feel," assented Lake O'Brien. "I hate to admit it myself. It makes me feel like a candidate for the padded-cell brigade. But you've got eyes, Barrett. There's the proof before you. How else can you explain it?"

"I can't," snorted Barrett stubbornly, "and I ain't going to try to. This is a dream, that's what. A dream or a hally-soosynation. For all I know, maybe I got conked in the fight, and I'm delirial. Yeah—that's what it is! I'm off my button and seeing things. I don't believe none of this. You hear me—?" He swung suddenly to the peephole, raised his voice in a roar. "I don't believe in you! Get

it? You guys are spooks, dreams, nightmares! Go 'way! And—Oh, my golly! *Ramey!*”

His words ended in an agonized howl. For his shout had brought an unexpected result. Real or unreal, the “hallucinations” thronging the hall below had an auditory sense. At Red's bellow, all murmurs, all motion, suddenly stopped—and every eye turned upward toward the source of those cries. Now something like a shudder coursed through the assemblage. Voices rose shrilly, a dozen figures raced bleating from the room . . . and to the last man, those left behind fell to their knees in attitudes of abject worship!

Ramey turned in confusion to the girl beside him.

“*Now* what?” he demanded helplessly.

“I think I know!” said Sheila. “This chamber we're in is the interior of one of their idols. These peepholes must be the eyes in the image. Or perhaps they are just concealed in the carving. Look underneath this opening. See that funnel-shaped pipe? That's a speaking-tube, magnifying the voice. No wonder they're excited. When Red shouted, it must have seemed their god was bellowing orders to them.”

“That's it!” agreed Lake. “That was a fairly common trick of ancient priesthoods. Hollow gods from which they could spy on their followers, deliver oracular utterances. Hand me that torch, Syd. I'm going down again and look for a doorway out of this image. There must be one.”

He ducked below. As he did so, there came a second concerted moan from the throng. This time Ramey guessed the reason. The flickering of the torch across the viewholes must have seemed to the watchers like the glint of life winking in their idol's eyes.

Then there rose a commotion from the far end of the hall, the babble of excited voices, and Ramey understood where had gone those who had fled the temple. To fetch someone in authority. For now there sounded the dry scrape of marching feet, the clank of metal upon metal, and into the altar room tramped a company of—

“Holy potatoes!” exclaimed Red awefully. “*Giants!*”

For giants indeed the newcomers were. An armed band of men, the shortest of whom towered a full head and shoulders above any other man in the hail. Ramey was six foot two. Red and the O'Brien brothers each topped the six foot mark. But Ramey knew that all of them would appear striplings if ranged beside this file of yoemanry. Six nine seemed a fair guess as to their aver-

age height, and he who marched at their head, a raven-haired, amber-skinned mountain of a man in the rich trappings of rank, assuredly topped the seven foot mark!

A mutter passed through the crowd as he entered, and Ramey, whose eye was trained to note the psychological reactions of men, thought he could detect in the attitude of those gathered a poorly veiled hostility, a resentment and will to rebellion held in check only by fear.

Then the newcomer spoke, his voice harsh, imperious, demanding. The natives answered, pointing fearfully at the idol housing Ramey and his companions. The giant captain's brow darkened, his eyes flashed scornful fire, and once more he raised his voice. Ramey turned to Dr. Aiken eagerly.

"What's he saying, Doc? Can you—?"

"No. It's no language I know. It sounds slightly like Sanscrit, but the syllablation and intonation are oddly different."

And then, surprisingly, Sheng-ti spoke beside them.

"Aie, doom!" he moaned softly. "Lo, the day of our judgment is at hand. For the gods walk again and speak their ancient tongues!"

Sheila gripped the old priests's arm tightly.

"Sheng-ti—you understand? Translate for us!"

"They speak of mysteries too holy for humble ears," groaned the priest. "They tell the Mighty One the idol has spoken. He laughs and says it is untrue. But they insist. Now he mocks them, calls them fearful fools."

Red Barrett snorted.

"Oh! A wise guy, huh? A know-it-all? Well, watch me take him down a peg!" And again his lips found the tube. His voice rolled in a hollow roar. "*Tally-ho, smart-aleck! Brooklyn-dodgers . . . officeofproductionmanagement . . . gadzooks . . . How do you like them apples?*" He fell away from the opening, chuckling, as the giant's blanched face whirled toward the idol. "Guess that'll hold His Nibs for a while! What's he saying now, Sheng-ti?"

The *bonze* listened intently as again the saffron-hued commander spoke. But Red's gag had backfired. For—

"The Great One admits," relayed Sheng-ti, "that the idol did speak. Now he is affrighted lest the god may have been offended. He would make atonement. Lo, he bids his warriors seize a virgin, and bear her to the altar."

At their leader's command, two of the giant yoemen had thrust forward into the throng, striking with the flat of their swords any

who would hinder them. Now they tore from the arms of an aged man a young, white-skinned girl, and bore her, struggling and screaming, to the dais beneath Ramey.

"Ramey!" cried Sheila in sudden horror. "We've got to stop them! They're going to sacrifice her—to *us*!"

Red Barrett gasped, "Omi-gawd!" in a stricken voice, and spun to Ramey. "Why can't I learn to keep my big feeder shut? What—what'll we do, Ramey?"

The solution came from below, where Lake O'Brien's voice suddenly raised in a shout. "Found it, gang! I *knew* there'd be a door somewhere. Well, you Jonahs—any of you want out of this whale's belly?"

Ramey cried, "Come on, Red!" and flung himself down the ladder. Then, as the trio stood before the portal Lake had discovered, a sudden idea struck him. "Wait a minute! This is our chance to make an imprint on the natives!" He craned his neck, shouted to those still above. "Sheila, tell Sheng-ti to forbid the sacrifice! Tell him to say that the children of the god come forth to claim their victim."

The priest's words boomed above them, prefacing their entrance into this strange world. And—it was a great success. As the door swung open, and Ramey and his fellows burst forward onto a raised dais, it was to find all action abruptly frozen. The slave girl, her simple toga-like garment torn and disarranged, her wealth of red-chestnut hair, loosed by the violence of her efforts to escape, cascading to her waist, stood motionless in the grasp of two stricken fighting men. Elsewhere a silence born of terror gripped the room. An awed paralysis which was shattered by the terrified screams of a hundred throats as the adventurers appeared.

It was, Ramey could not help thinking with a sort of detached amusement, a most dramatic entrance. A super-extra, whipper-dipper of an entrance. Like all men with a sense of humor, he had an instinct for showmanship. Striding forward he realized with a little shock that throughout the excitement of the past half hour he had continued to clench in his left hand the object over which he had stumbled in the time-traveling cabinet. What it was, he did not know. But it might mean something to his audience. So as he stepped forward he lifted it proudly, melodramatically, above his head.

The reaction was swifter and more astonishing than he had hoped for. A concerted gasp swept through the crowd. The two giant guards released their captive and tumbled to their knees, and a great cry shook the temple. Ramey's eyebrows lifted; he tossed

a swift query over his shoulder. "I struck pay dirt that time! What are they saying, Sheila?"

And apparently from the lips of the idol—for Ramey saw now that it was a gigantic, hideously leering statue in which they had hidden—came the answer.

"They're hailing you as a god, Ramey! And they are crying out in fear because that thing you're carrying is the Bow of—of Rudra!"

Now the slave girl, whimpering prayerful entreaties, slipped from the the two who held her and threw herself at Ramey Winters' feet. It was swell stuff. Very godlike, flattering stuff. But also very embarrassing. Ramey touched the girl's shoulder, disturbed to find that she was trembling violently, gently lifted her and turned to Barrett.

"Take care of her, Red. Maybe these overstuffed guys will try to make another pass at her."

Red grinned from ear to ear. "Who, me? Oh, boy—did I say no? Come here, sugar!" He took the girl into the shelter of his arm. He didn't seem to mind it a bit.

Then from the back of the hall moved the majestically dark-visaged one who had commanded the sacrifice. He walked erect and proud, as befitted a noble, but his eyes were cautiously humble. Though he towered a full head above Winters, his attitude was respectful. To the edge of the dais he approached, stopped there and addressed the quartet. This time Sheila forwarded Sheng-ti's translation without prompting.

"He is Ravana, Ramey. Lord of Lanka, and appointed Overseer of—of something. Sheng-ti doesn't understand all he says. He bows before you and begs acceptance of the sacrifice he offered."

Ramey said grimly, "Tell him that for two cents I'd yank off his leg and stuff it down his throat. I don't like this sacrifice stuff." He motioned to Lake and Red. "Let's get back into the idol. We've saved the redhead, here. Now we'd better save ourselves. Hop back into the time-machine and go back where we came from—"

From above came the voice of Dr. Aiken, alarmed and piteously eager.

"Oh, no, Winters! Not yet! Not quite yet! We can return to our own time later. But this is the opportunity of a lifetime! We can't leave until we've learned more about this magnificent culture . . . this period! Besides—in our own era, the Japs are still hunting for us. We must allow several hours to pass before we return."

Ramey sought his companions' eyes. Lake grinned and nodded. Red tightened his arm about the shoulders of his new and welcome responsibility. "Okay with me, chum. I'm just beginning to enjoy this Cooks' Tour." Ramey surrendered reluctantly.

"All right, then. Come on down. But before you do, better tell this guy to take us to the Kingfish around here."

Words rolled from the idol's motionless lips, and the giant chieftain nodded obeisance. And a few minutes later, the remainder of the time-traveling group spilled from their refuge within the statue.

It was all strange terrain to Ramey, the way through which the amber-skinned Ravana led them, but their course was apparently familiar enough to Dr. Aiken and his assistants.

Across an open court, up a long staircase, and into the most central of the ziggurats which comprised Angkor Wat. Lake O'Brien said excitedly, "By golly, Sheila, your guess was right! You said this building was the Big Shot's council hall—remember? And Syd and I thought— Well, I'll be jiggered!" His voice choked to a hollow whisper. "Golly, look! The—the carvings come to life! Apes! Warrior apes!"

For standing before the door of the chamber they approached, garbed in the trappings of men, casqued and helmed, sandaled and bucklered, gripping their bronze-tipped spears in altogether humanoid fashion, stood two huge apes who snapped their arms to attention as the group neared!

But even this marvel paled into insignificance in a moment. For now the great, carven doors of the council chamber swung open, exposing a throne-room of inconceivable grandeur. Ramey's first staggered gaze described trappings of fabulous wealth. Gold and ivory, teak and silver, ebony and the sparking luster of priceless gems. These things he saw and noted subconsciously. But at the moment they roused no wonder in him for there was—something else! A presence in the room that utterly robbed him of his breath.

A man, seated on the golden throne. A man of Ramey's own height. An older man, gray of hair and lined of visage, now leaning forward curiously to greet them. A grave, quiet, kindly man, in all respects like the millions of humans living on the earth of Ramey's era. But for one thing. The flesh of this ruler was—*hyacinthine blue!*

CHAPTER VIII

Rakshas

With a sort of detached wonder, Ramey noticed that the blue man did not rise from his throne to greet them.

Even a ruler of men, the young airman thought dimly, should humble himself before gods. Then the conviction came to him that the ruler of Angkor did not consider them gods! Of their origin he had, could have, no knowledge. But it was obvious that he recognized them, somehow, for exactly what they were: human beings caught in a web of circumstances inexplicable even to themselves.

So the blue lord's preoccupation was with the giant Ravana. To the amber-skinned one he addressed his questions. The spate of their conversation sped back and forth between them so swiftly that there was not even time for the attentive Sheng-ti to translate for his companions.

But though the words of a conversation may be unintelligible, its tenor is oftentimes obvious to the careful witness. It became clear to Ramey that Ravana, at first polite in his salutation to the blue lord of Angkor, was becoming more presumptuous and argumentative every minute.

His shoulders became stiffer, straighter, more bold. Once he glanced back as if to assure himself that behind him ranged the solid phalanx of his warriors. His voice assumed a belligerent stridency, and an arrogant light emboldened his eyes.

Nor was Ramey the only one to notice this gathering insolence. The blue ruler frowned, and his tone developed an edge of asperity.

Now, however, the amber giant exhibited startling rudeness. Boldly he interrupted the azure-tinted emperor in midsentence, and cried what sounded like a loud demand. A brief, startled silence fell upon the court room. In that silence, Dr. Aiken prodded the *bonze* for information.

Scanty as it was, it verified Ramey's suspicions.

"The Tall One says the gods appeared to *him*; he therefore claims the right to house their mortal avatars whilst they visit. The Blue One reminds him he is but a guest at the palace, and that he, Sugriva, is emperor of Angkor."

Lake chuckled. "Huh! Talk about your southern hospitality! It's peanuts compared to this! Scrapping over who's going to put us up for the night!"

"Scrapping" was a bit of an exaggeration. It did not quite reach that stage. But in the moment following the silence it looked very much as though it might. The tall lord, Ravana, concluding his defiant demands, turned and snapped an order to his followers. Their hands leaped to their swords, they moved as though to surround the little party of time-exiles.

But now the Emperor Sugriva had reached the end of his patience, and with a swift decision exposed the hand of steel beneath the velvet glove. He cried a word. It might have been a title or a name.

"*Kohrisan!*"

The cry brought an instant response. From one of the arched doorways of the council room, as if he had been waiting on hair-trigger for the call to catapult him forward, sprang a strange figure. A short, gnarled figure so elaborately adorned, *cap-a-pied*, in the glittering habilaments of a warrior that Ramey had to look twice to see it was no man at all, but another of the weirdly humanoid apes.

The monkey captain sized up the situation at a glance, lifted his voice in a cry that bore little resemblance to the shrill chattering of ordinary banderlogs. The apparently tenantless court sprang to life. Through every portal flooded troops of the armed monkey-men to arraign themselves grimly behind their leader. The furry captain spoke, this time directly to Ravana, who scowled at him.

For a moment it seemed Ravana trembled on the brink of a decision. His right hand yearned toward his sword. Then he shrugged and forced a smile to his lips. He made a perfunctory, almost insulting, bow to the blue-skinned lord of the jungle, then crisped a word to his followers. They turned and marched from the room. As Ravana passed the squat ape-man, he sneered a mocking taunt; the gaudily garbed little creature flinched as if struck with a blow. Then Ravana and his bullies were gone, and Sugriva beckoned Ramey's party to advance toward him.

Ramey's first impression of the emperor had been that Sugriva was a wishy-washy sort. Now he was forced to alter that opinion. There was no nervousness, no uncertainty in the blue lord's manner. He seemed to have weighed carefully the problem and arrived at a conclusion. He was a gentle man but he could act when action was required. And he was a man of penetrating intellect. He had already recognized that Sheng-ti was the only one to whom his words held meaning. He addressed himself to the *bonze*. Sheng-ti

answered with a new note of humility in his voice, then relayed the message.

"The Blue One says to follow him. He would understand and be understood."

Wonderingly the little group followed Sugriva to a small privy chamber beyond the throne room. As they entered this, Ramey's eyes widened to behold another metal cabinet somewhat similar to that in which they had been borne here, but of hemispherical shape. Into this the ruler motioned them. Red Barrett looked dubious.

"Hey, what's he going to do, Ramey? Send us back where we come from? So soon? Aw, gee! Me and Toots here ain't hardly got acquainted yet."

Syd offered warningly, "Look out. It's a trick of some sort. I don't trust—"

"I think it's all right," Ramey reassured them. "Yes, I know it is. See, he's going in it himself. Come on. We'll never find out what this is all about if we don't take a chance."

He stepped into the chamber behind Surgriva. The others followed. The blue lord closed the door.

This chamber, too, had a control panel on one wall. To this the emperor went, adjusted small dials and pressed a plunger. Sheila screamed. Cries of alarm ripped the throats of Lake and Dr. Aiken. Ramey Winters was conscious that he, too, had cried aloud under the impact of a lance of fiery pain piercing his brain. From the ceiling of the chamber a radiation terrible to look upon blazed down upon them, its intangible beam of light seemed to smash them with tangible force. Ramey staggered a step forward, clutching for Sugriva. But even as he did so, he was aware that the ruler pressed another button, that the radiation had died, and the pain was suddenly gone.

His head throbbed and burned. He cried, "Damn you! What's the big idea? What are you trying to do to us?"

But there was disarming candor in the blue man's smile. "Peace, my friend," he soothed. "There will be no more pain. It is over now."

"Over?" repeated Ramey. "It had damned well *better* be over. You can't—" Then he halted, his mouth foolishly agape, as realization of what had happened dawned upon him.

He had spoken to the Lord of Angkor. And the blue lord had answered. And each of them had understood the other!

Sheila Aiken stared at their new acquaintance wildly.

"You—you're speaking English!"

He shook his head, a quiet smile on his lips. "No, on the contrary, it is you who speak my tongue. Not that it matters. We can converse in either. Now that we have undergone the ministration of the *vilyisha*, each of us possesses the other's language." He turned to the yellow-skinned *bonze* who, heretofore, had been his sole interpreter. There was a curious comprehension and sympathy in his eyes. "And you, my friend—your brain has cleared?"*

The surly Sheng-ti was surly no longer. An amazing change had come over him; his eyes, which had ever been dark and cloudy with half-mad suspicion, were now gleaming. Ramey knew, even before the old priest spoke, what this meant. The mysterious *vilyisha* had performed for Sheng-ti the greatest of all possible services. It had lifted from his brain the cloud of insanity which had veiled it for years!

Sheng-ti cried out, a choking little cry of joy, and dropped to his knees. "It is, O my Lord! Thou knowest it is indeed clear and strong again!"

Sugriva laid a hand on his shoulder, raising him.

"I am sorry it was necessary to subject you to even a moment's pain. But there was no other way. The patterns of the brain are now rearranged without a modicum of discomfort." As he spoke he opened the door again, they returned to the room whence they had come. "You are all recovered now?"

Dr. Aiken's eyes were those of a new Balboa staring out across uncharted seas of knowledge.

"The *vilyisha*! Transference of knowledge by machine! Learning by superimposition of brain patterns!" he whispered. "Lord, what an achievement! Where did it come from?"

"It is an invention of my people," Sugriva told him.

"Your people?" repeated Ramey. "Who are your people, my Lord? In the world from which we came there are no men of your pigmentation. Who on earth *are* your people?"

It was then the blue lord Sugriva smiled. There was a touch of sadness in his voice. "My people are not of Earth, my young friend. They are of—another world altogether!"

* Study of brain structure has convinced medical men that the degree of human intelligence is commensurable not to the size of the brain, but by the number and depth of its convolutions. These groovelike depressions in the gray-matter are apparently fashioned by thought-action.

Since it is also believed that thought itself is an electrical phenomenon, it is altogether conceivable that a machine might be devised whereby a transformation of patterns from one brain to another might be achieved. The *vilyisha* of Rudra is evidently based on a refinement of some such principle as this.—Ed.

"*Venus!*" cried Dr. Aiken suddenly. "Venus—that is your homeland! I knew it! Ramey, do you remember just as the Japanese attacked I was about to tell you of one of the oddest carvings we had discovered? That mural was a representation of the solar system, showing at the center the mother Sun, then, circling about her in their orbits, the planets of Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, and the other spheres.

"Two things about this mural perplexed us. One, that there was a definite line scored between the planets Venus and Earth, such a line as experience in deciphering Angkor's symbolism had taught us always represented 'contact' of some sort.

"The second point was that immediately beneath this diagram were a series of smaller carvings. One showing a forest of lush vegetation unlike anything known to Man, another showing a cylindrical, shiplike object surrounded by heavenly bodies, a third showing a troupe of earthmen kneeling before a man like Sugriva. A man with blue skin. My Lord—you know the carving whereof I speak?"*

Sugriva nodded. "Indeed, I know it well. Did I not cause it to be made? In the long years that have elapsed since I assumed the protectorate of this Earth colony I have had my subjects carve much of the history of our people into the walls of this citadel. But more of that later. I would hear now of yourselves. You came hither in the cabinet of Rudra?"

Ramey said, "Then you knew of the time machine?"

"Of a certainty, my son. Was it not built by my own blood brother, Rudra, who, until he grew restless and fretful, ruled this colony with me? Ah, he was a brilliant one, Rudra, and a great scientist. It was he who designed the *vilyisha*, aye, and even the Bow of Death which now you bear. Important things might he and I have accomplished had he been content to stay here with me. But a score of years ago, dissatisfied and impatient, he built in the chamber beneath the altar room the cabinet which flies backward in Time. In this cabinet he made many trips into the past, returning ever and anon to amuse me with tales of marvels seen. But ever longer and more daring grew his trips, until finally there was one from which he returned not ever, nor the cabinet in which he had gone. Tell me—and saw you my blood brother Rudra in the era

* The mural here described is no invention of the author. It actually exists. Many and ludicrous have been the attempts of savants to give a logical explanation of its meaning. Readers of scientific fiction, less hindered by dogma and prejudice, may be willing to accept it as factual proof that at one time in history intercourse did exist between this earth and the planet Venus.—Ed.

whence you came?"

Dr. Aiken shook his head sorrowfully. "No, my Lord. We saw him not. The cabinet was thick with dust, and Rudra's bow lay on the floor. The machine itself had lain hidden in its chamber from the sight of man for countless centuries."

Sugriva sighed.

"Then he is indeed perished. But tell me—how came you to find the cabinet? And from what ancient era came you? Rudra found many signs of life in the ages he traversed, but never a race of Earthmen cultured as yourselves."

"We are not from the Past, my Lord, but the Future."

"Future! But my brother's machine could not safely move forward in Time! He told me so. Only into the Past—"

"Nevertheless, he must have tried. For we found his cabinet in an age five thousands of years later than this."

Sugriva nodded dolefully.

"Now I can guess why he returned not. He was daring, my brother. Too daring. But—the future, you say? Tell me, then—is my small colony a great and beautiful metropolis in the period whence you came hither?"

"Not so, my Lord Sugriva," answered Dr. Aiken regretfully. "Somewhere in the centuries which span between now and our era, an evilness has befallen this colony of yours. For in the world we left behind us, these mighty halls and temples are but a haunting wonder lost in the slumbering sea of leafy jungles."

Sugriva's sadness deepened.

"This is grievous news you bring me, my friends. If what you say is true, if fifty centuries hence this colony is vanished, its people scattered, then my labors here are of no avail. And my mission on Earth has failed. But—why?"

It was a question for which the time-exiles knew no answer. Its solution lay yet in Sugriva's future, and was so far buried in their world's past as to be a forgotten secret. But they were spared the necessity of answering. For at that moment came an interruption. There wakened a flurry of action at the central gate, the doorway opened, and through its great portals swept a woman.

And *what* a woman! She was tall . . . much taller than the average man, almost as tall as Ramey himself. But there was no gangling awkwardness to her height. Her figure was perfectly proportioned to her stature. She walked with the slow and lithe and languorous grace of a jungle creature. A panther, perhaps, thought Ramey, with rapt approval watching her move nearer. Yes, assuredly a panther. For she was neither white nor Mongolian.

Her skin was the soft, fine ivory of the Eurasian. Ivory, shading to tawny gold with the contours of her body, deepening with the curve of her thigh, the round of her elbow, the shadowy cup of her breasts. Pantherine, too, were her eyes. Triangular eyes, long-lashed and lazy, with pupils of dusty emerald.

Captain Kohrisan sprang to attention as she approached, saluted and cried introduction:

“My lords—the Lady Rakshasi!”

CHAPTER IX

“—Or Not to Be”

The Lady Rakshasi spoke, and her voice was just what Ramey thought it would be. Throaty and mellow, caressing-low with a throbbing undertone of promise. She addressed Sugriva, and her words included all present, but there was that in her tone, her manner, the sidelong appraisal of her eyes, which made Ramey feel her welcome was for him alone.

“Greetings, Sire. My brother tells me the Children of the Gods favor us with a visit. I come to welcome them.”

Red Barrett made no attempt to conceal his frank admiration. He said, “Don’t mention it, baby. Boy, Ramey, I’m getting gladder we come every minute. They grow ’em terrific around these parts! First little carrot-top, here, then this Ziegfeld doll—”

The Lady Rakshasi looked confused. “I am sorry,” she apologized. “The red-haired god no doubt speaks words of great wisdom. But his humble maidservant does not understand.”

“It is nothing,” Ramey assured her hastily. “The red-haired god but expresses his pleasure.” Aside to Barrett he whispered, “Utcay the ackscray, opeday!” and Lake O’Brien guffawed loudly.

The interview was brief. That was Sugriva’s doing. Politely, but with gentle firmness, he told her, “You have done well, Lady Rakshasi. The gods are pleased with your attendance. But now you must leave, for they would rest. They have come from afar to visit their worshippers, and they are weary.”

The lovely Rakshasi bowed obedience. “Yes, Sire. I hear and obey. But ere I go, my brother bids me tender unto you his humblest apology for that which transpired in this hall. He bitterly rues his hastiness. He was confused, he bids me say, and overcome with awe by the presence of gods.”

“It is forgotten,” said Sugriva graciously. “Go now in peace, my lady. Convey to your brother our forgiveness.”

Rakshasi left, but Ramey’s eyes followed her to the door. And the golden creature knew it, for just as she slipped from the

chamber she turned once more, and for a fleeting instant her green eyes met Ramey's fascinated gray ones. And the look that passed between them held little of piety.

Then she was gone, and with her departure it was as if a disturbing fever had left the room. Ramey, feeling the gaze of Lake O'Brien curious upon him, felt a stab of warmth in his cheeks, and wondered just how much an ass he had made of himself. Apparently he had done a pretty fair job of it, for the one person whose eyes would not meet his was Sheila. And strangely, now that Rakshasi was gone, it was the clear, mist-blue sanity of Sheila's eyes that Ramey wanted most to look upon. He shook himself angrily and turned to Sugriva.

"Sire, you permitted the Lady Rakshasi believe we are gods. Why? When you know we are not."

The Venusian overlord nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, my friend, I did not disabuse her belief. But it was no useless deceit. What I did, I did for your own safety."

"Our safety, my Lord?"

"You have probably already guessed that Ravana is no more of this earth than am I. As my people come from Gaanel, that planet which you know as the morning or evening star, he and his giant underlings spring from the red desert planet of Videlia."

"Videlia?" repeated Dr. Aiken. "You mean—Mars?"

Sugriva searched his brain, nodded.

"Yes. That is its name in your language."

Lake O'Brien moaned.

"Sweet saints, 'what fools we mortals be'! And men think they are intelligent. Yet here, five thousand years before our time, the civilizations of our two neighboring worlds have simultaneously developed spaceflight—"

"No my friend. It was we, and only we, who learned the secret of spaceflight. And like fools, we gave it away."

"Gave it to the Videlians?"

"Yes. We Gaanelians are a quiet, peaceloving people. For centuries our culture has been great. Our cities dwarf anything you humans know. Our commerce, agriculture and industry are great. We want for nothing. Thus we have turned our leisure hours to the pursuit of knowledge and the refinement of art.

"Our science discovered the secret of flight amongst the stars. Our expeditions flew to all the children of the Sun; to the planets you know as Mercury, Mars, even massive Jupiter and far, frozen Pluto.

"Only on three other planets, however, did we find life. Here on Earth—crude, nomadic barbarism for the most part, with only

in one or two places the rude beginnings of a social culture—on the second moon of Jupiter, and on Mars.

“The Martian, or Videlian, culture alone was in any way equal to our own. In our blind altruism we freely gave the Videlian giants our great secret—” Sugriva smiled ruefully—“and now we regret it. For we have learned that the Videlians are not such lovers of peace as we. They are hard cruel people, greedy and grasping, predatory. Their space-vessels, like ours, have brought colonists to Earth. And of these interlopers, Lord Ravana is ruler. Lately it has become increasingly clear that he has not the same benevolent designs on the people of Earth that I was sent here to bring about.”

“You mean he wants Earth for himself?”

“That is what I suspect and fear. Consider. With a whole wide world of pleasant hills and valleys in which to establish himself, Ravana chose to construct his fortified capital on an inaccessible island sixty miles off this mainland—the Isle of Lanka.

“While he has pretended friendship, visiting me here and occasionally inviting me to his island stronghold, I have heard strange rumors about his overlordship. Where as it has ever been the Gaanelian desire to achieve harmony between our race and yours, it is hinted that the humans who serve Ravana do so not as willing subjects but as—slaves! We have tried to pass on to our neighbors something of our learning and culture, exhibiting good will and friendliness. But I am told that what Ravana wants he exacts by forceful means.

“It was to investigate these rumors that I recently sent for representatives of all Earth’s governments to meet here at Chitrakuta. You saw these representatives, I believe, in the altar room?”

Ramey nodded. “They didn’t seem to be particularly fond of Ravana. I don’t blame them much. There’s a brutal streak in the guy. His first idea, when the idol spoke, was to pacify it with a human sacrifice. If we hadn’t spiked that deal, I’m afraid this young lady—” He nodded toward the chestnut-haired beauty clinging close to Barrett’s side—“wouldn’t be with us now.

“Well, Sugriva, I’m beginning to understand the setup now. It’s not so unusual. The world we left behind was being sadly muddled by a mob with pretty much the same idea as the Videlians. They want to be topdogs or nothing. So, now that we’re here, what can we do to help you out? You want us to continue playing gods while you hold your round table conferences with the boys in the back room?”

But Sugriva shook his head. “Not now, my friend. I shall explain that later. First you must have food, rest, time to collect

your thoughts. Meanwhile, guard carefully the Bow. It is of vital importance. Kohrisan—" The ape-captain saluted smartly—"show our guests to chambers where they may rest and refresh themselves."

The time-farers allowed themselves to be led away.

So began the incredible adventure, the "strange journey" of which Johnny Grinnell, in the prescience of life's ending, had spoken.

It was Syd O'Brien's idea when, that evening, after having bathed, napped or refreshed themselves as each saw fit, they gathered again in the garden—close outside their quarters, that they should bring this episode to a close. The gloomy twin looked—if such a thing were possible—more disgruntled than ever.

"If you ask me," he said, "we ought to get going."

"Going?" repeated his brother.

"That's what I said. I don't like this business of messing around in things that happened five thousand years before we were born. It's not normal and it's not right. No good will come of it. I'm for getting back to the time cabinet and pulling out of there before something happens and we can never get back."

Sheila gasped, "And miss this marvelous opportunity to discover the truth about things men have always wondered about, argued over? Why, Syd, we haven't even begun to discover the marvels of Angkor!"

Dr. Aiken said seriously, "Yes, Sydney, Sheila is right. Fate has granted us an opportunity to solve more of the mysteries of Man's beginnings than all earth's savants have been able to uncover in two thousand years. It is more than an opportunity; it is an obligation! We cannot leave yet. Why—" His fine old eyes glowed—"this afternoon as the rest of you slept, I wandered through the courts and the temples, conversing in their ancient tongues with men whose races were vanished before the first recorded history was written! Already I have learned enough to establish an entirely new chronology of history. And I have merely skimmed the surface!"

"Just the same—" grumbled Syd.

"Just the same," snapped his brother, "you're nuts! Back in our time, these temples are probably crawling with a regiment of vengeful Japs, wondering where the hell we disappeared to. It would be suicidal to go back now. We'd better just sit tight for a week or so, take advantage of our opportunity, and return to our own time with a real contribution to science."

So it was decided. And somehow a week passed. Where fled those warm days and even more languorous nights, Ramey Winters could never afterward tell. For there was much to be seen and done, and once the weird comprehension of their actually being here established itself in his mind, Ramey, like all the others, dipped eagerly into the garnering of new knowledge.

With the Lord Sugriva they spent many hours. Even feeling sure, as they did, that everything the blue lord of Angkor told them was true, some of his statements were so fantastic as to be almost incredible. As when Dr. Aiken queried him on the extent of Gaanelian colonization.

"I do not know, exactly," admitted Sugriva. "But there must be five, six, perhaps more colonies. One of my compatriots, I know, governs an outpost south and west of here. A desolate territory bordered on the north by vast desertland. Another bears the light of culture to jungle natives on a far continent, a hemisphere removed. Still a third has established himself on a tiny island to the west, where the mighty sea begins."

"Lower Egypt!" cried Dr. Aiken raptly. "Its culture, differing sharply from that of the Upper Kingdom, has always puzzled archeologists. The lost Merouvian civilization which left great paved roads and cities where now is Peru. And a tiny island—?"

"*England!*" cried Sheila. "Daddy, that explains why the legend of the 'blue gods' persists in ancient Anglo-Saxon history. The Druids worshipped 'men from the skies.' They had their 'sky-blue heaven' of Tir-n'a-nog. And as late as 1,000 A.D. the Picts went forth to battle with their bodies painted with blue pigment!"

But again, as before, arose the question: if these colonies now existed, into what darkness had they disappeared that those of the Twentieth Century knew them only as legend? This was a cause of great sadness to Sugriva.

"I can only confess," he conceded regretfully, "that somehow our mission, the bringing of culture to your less enlightened Earth races, must have failed. Why, I do not know."

Here a great thought struck Ramey Winters.

"But if we could only find out what destroyed your attempt, perhaps we could do something to prevent it!" His eyes glowed. "What a glorious thing for mankind! Already you have converted men from nomadic wanderers into a semi-cultured people. If that cause which destroyed—or is to destroy—your tutorship were to be removed—" Ramey faltered over the use of tense, feeling keenly the anomaly of their position as men of a future age, living in a past, being part of that past, yet knowing inerrably that

which was to come— “Why, then, the whole history of mankind could be changed! There would be no decay in Egyptian culture, no Rome rising mightily, then toppling, no long Dark Ages. There would be only steady progress, ever forward, upward, to greater knowledge!”

Syd sniffed, “You’re day-dreaming, Ramey. The fact that we exist proves that the history of mankind took a certain channel. There’s no way of changing that. Is there, Doctor?”

“I don’t know, Sydney. There is much to be said on either side. It may be that history is, as you say, unchangeable. But there is the problem of casuality. Once this era *was*. We, having not been born then were not here. Causes developed effects new causes—and a course of history was written leading to the world we know.

“But a new factor enters an old equation. This era again *is*, but we who do not properly belong here have entered into the picture by way of a time-machine. It is conceivable that our very *being here* is sufficient of a cause to change and divert the entire sequence of events which would otherwise have been the ‘future.’”

“Rot!” snorted Syd. “Excuse me, Doctor, but that’s not logical. For if our being here were to change history in any slightest way—then we would automatically cease to exist! Because the exact and precarious chain of circumstances which brought us into being would have been altered.”

CHAPTER X

Exposure

So they dropped the matter there, completely unable to solve the problem, each convinced that his theory was correct, none without a lingering doubt but that the other’s might be true. And the days sped by.

They were fruitful days. Lake, who had a flair for the philological, spent much time studying the Gaanelian language. To Red and Ramey, as professional airmen, what was of particular interest was the matter of spaceflight. Gaanelian ships, Sugriva told them, called regularly at every inferior conjunction of Earth and Venus, Videlian craft less frequently. “But often enough,” the blue lord admitted ruefully.

“And these ships—” demanded Ramey eagerly. “Their method of propulsion? What is it?”

Sugriva frowned. “I am not sure I can tell you, my friend. I have searched my brain for the words in your tongue with which to explain—but they do not exist. It is a concept utterly foreign

to your culture. The nearest I can come to an explanation is to say there are 'fields of force' between the planets, and on these fields the ships feed and ride."

"An electrical transmission of some sort, perhaps?"

But again the protector of Chitrakuta looked baffled. "Now there is a word in your tongue," he apologized, "which is foreign to *me*. A concept of your civilization I cannot grasp."

And Ramey realized suddenly that despite its many magnificent scientific achievements, the Gaanelian race was apparently in total ignorance of electricity! It was used nowhere; not for heating, lighting, communication. He tried to explain the phenomenon to Sugriva, but it was a hopeless task.

"I am sorry, Ramey. But that is a study in which I am not adept. If you will but wait until the next spacecraft arrives, a matter of but a few months, there will be those on board with whom you can talk more understandingly."

And with this Ramey had to be content.

But if the blue lord's knowledge of mechanical science was deficient, he lacked few other qualifications of leadership. During the stay of the time-exiles was held the grand parlay for which representatives had been summoned from every corner of the civilized eastern world.

Sugriva proved superbly his right to rule. To the gratification of the assembled humans and the disgruntlement of the Lord Ravana he laid down the Law. That there should be at all times peace and amity between the natives of Earth and their foreign visitors. That Earthmen should feel always free to call upon those of Venus for information and aid in new projects. That the chosen of Earth's youth should gather annually in the nearest Gaanehan colony for instruction in knowledge and culture. That Gaanelians and Videlians should at all times respect the territorial rights of Earth's races, and should at no time make any demands upon persons or services of terrestrial subjects for which the Earthmen did not receive complete and satisfactory compensation.

There had to be teeth in this pronouncement. Sugriva bared them plainly, for the second time exhibiting the sternness which underlay his placid nature when he thundered determination to make all abide by this covenant, under pain of the displeasure and (if need be) the armed reprisal of the Gaanelian overlord. He did not hint what nature these sanctions might assume except to Ramey Winters, and then on only one occasion.

"Guard well the Bow of Rudra, Ramey Winters. The day may yet dawn when we will have need of it."

Ramey said, "But what is it supposed to do, Sire? I have experimented with it, but nothing seems to happen when I finger the grips. It's a pretty useless hunk of ordnance, if you ask me."

Sugriva said, "I am quite content that you do not now how to operate the Bow, my son. It is too dreadful a weapon to be lightly exploited. But if the time ever should come for its use—"

So the pact was drawn up, and the several races became signatories. It was a direct and challenging blow to the ambitions of the Lord Ravana, one that he swallowed with difficulty. But swallow it he did—though perhaps one of the greatest contributing factors to his signing was the fact that at the final meeting were ranged beside Sugriva the time-exiles—and that in Ramey's ready hand dangled nonchalantly the dreaded Bow of Rudra.

But the days at Chitrakuta, for such by now they had all learned to be the Gaanelian name for the temple they had known as Angkor Wat, were not all concerned with study or the grim business of government. There were hours of relaxation, too.

Red Barrett, for one, was thoroughly enjoying the championship of the beautiful damsel who had been placed in his care days before. Of course she proved a baffling bundle of loveliness in some respects. As on the first day, when Ramey chanced upon the duo in time to hear Red demanding perplexedly, "How? How's that? Come again. Toots!"

And: "Ich hight Evavne ab Daffydd y Marwnadd, mihr gneight," repeated his lovely charge demurely.

Red moaned. "Hey, Doc!" he yelled, "Hey. Sheila! Anybody got any spirits of ammonia with them? Toots, here, has the hiccups!"

Ramey went to his chum's aid. "What's wrong, Red?"

"It's Toots, here," complained Red aggrievedly. "I said to her, 'Look, Toots, I can't keep calling you "Toots" all the time. What's your real name?' So instead of giving me a straight answer, she makes with the double talk."

Dr. Aiken, who had been listening with amusement, now spoke up. "But the young lady *did* answer you, Barrett. She said she was 'Evavne, daughter of David and Marian.' And—" The old man smiled slyly—"I believe you've made something of an impression, my boy. She called you her—er—'knight'!"

"Yeah?" grinned Barrett. "Well, gee! That's okay, ain't it? Evavne, huh? Not a bad handle, Toots. But after this, you better talk English."

"She *is* talking English, Red."

"Huh? Aw, now, Doc—"

"Well, let us say, then, she is speaking the ancient tongue from

which modern English derives, I fancy—" said Dr. Aiken speculatively—"our charming friend is a daughter of one of those races which first settled the British Isles. A Pict, or a Celt."

"All I got to say," grumbled Red, "is that going in the *vilyisha* with us didn't do much good if that's the best English she can talk. Come on, Toots. You and me is going to see Sugriva and have him arrange another language-exchange in the recording booth."

And together they left on the expedition which was to remove their last lingual difficulty. They had no other kind.

Ramey Winters, too, was finding Chitrakuta conducive to thoughts far removed from the grim ones of hatred, war and death that had governed his life until his translation into this elder world.

In Sheila Aiken he had found a woman who, after all these years of avowed misanthropy, had the power of arousing within him strange sensations. New sensations to Ramey Winters, perhaps, but sensations which any wise men could have told him were as old as humankind.

There was about her a *something*—a peace, a quietude, a gentleness—which filled a vital need in his makeup, which calmed and complemented the flamelike restlessness of his own nature. With propinquity came greater admiration for Sheila Aiken. And as the days and nights, especially the nights, threw them into ever increasingly intimate contact, admiration deepened into something Ramey thought, believed, feared he could name—but dared not.

Vainly he reminded himself that he was a fighting man, a soldier. That all this madness was a strange interlude out of which sooner or later he must return to take his ordained place in the world he had left. That he must neither pledge himself nor demand pledges of one whose world was so far removed from his own.

But these decisions were more easily made than kept. And if, strolling at her side in the moonlight, Ramey never actually swept Sheila into his arms as he wished and knew he could, if he never actually spoke the words that with increasing frequency trembled on his lips, perhaps it was not necessary after all. For Sheila Aiken, though she had spent her twenty years living with men in wild, mannish places, was still inherently a woman. And she understood these things, and gloried in them.

And the days and the nights were sweet, and Chitrakuta was an Eden. But even Eden had its serpent. . .

Rakshasi had almost slipped from Ramey's memory. A week or

more had passed since he had met in the council hall of Sugriva when late one night there came to him a Videlian warrior bearing the message that the Lady Rakshasi awaited him in her apartment. He was urged to come, pleaded the messenger. A matter of grave importance.

Wondering, Ramey followed the man through darkened corridors to that section of the imperial city which housed the Videlian visitors.

If it were business the Lady Rakshasi wished to discuss, the manner of her approach to the subject would have been a revelation to the financial tycoons of Ramey's day. For when he entered her apartment it was to find a small chamber, intimately draped, warmly scented with the breath of perfume, and exotically furnished with a tumbled pile of silks and furs upon which gracefully reclined the golden woman of Mars.

In that room, enticingly dark save for small wicks guttering in corner niches, the Lady Rakshasi was more than ever the sleek, slumbrous cat of the jungles. The dusty emerald of her eyes lighted with invitation as he entered. She purred a word of command and the servant vanished. She and Ramey were alone.

"My Lord is gracious," she whispered in her husky voice, "to answer thus the plea of his humble servant." She touched the soft pillows beside her invitingly. "Would my Lord tarry and rest?"

He was, an inner consciousness warned Ramey, playing with fire. But an instinct stronger than reason lowered him beside her. This woman had something! The Hollywood of the world he had left behind would call it "oomph." More strictly rhetorical admirers would call it charm, fascination, allure. But he would have been a poor man indeed who could go without learning what the Lady Rakshasi wanted.

"Yes, my Lady?" asked Ramey. "What would you of me?"

The Lady Rakshasi turned slowly on one elbow, studied him long and lazily before answering. When she spoke her tone was servile still, but there was a question in her voice, and the suspicion of a challenge in her curious, heavy-lidded eyes.

"I called thee, my Lord," she replied, "to warn thee of an evil rumor which has of late gathered boldness in the temples. Believe truly that thy servant means no ill, nor doubts thy glory. But there are those who whisper that thou and thine companions are not gods at all—but only men! Some strangely say, men of another day."

"But, of course—" began Ramey. Then stopped, remembering the necessary deceit by which Sugriva hoped to maintain peace in

the colony. He finished lamely—"But of course they jest! Surely all saw us come from the heart of the holy image?"

Rakshasi smiled. "Aye, even so, my Lord. Thus told I them. But there be ever those who doubt. And they murmur that oftentimes the actions of thy companions are strangely ungodlike. They eat, they sleep like mortals. From place to place they transport themselves on foot rather than by instantaneous translation, as all men know is the way of gods. And many are the questions they ask, when all know the gods are omniscient."

It was not, Ramey had to concede ruefully, not just a chink in the armor. It was a gaping hole, big enough to drive a Mack truck through. He and his friends *were* touring around Chitarkuta like a bevy of wide-eyed schoolkids, and certainly putting on one hell of an unecclesiastical show!

"When the gods walk amongst men," he told her firmly, "they conduct themselves in the fashion of their worshippers. It is no man's right to question these things."

"Aye, my Lord?" This time Rakshasi's agreement was more swift. He had, Ramey thought, pulled a successful sandy. "So told I them, yea, and even my brother Ravana which lent an ear to their impious murmurings. 'These are in truth the gods,' spake I, 'come to mete justice and right to their children.' Still—" Here her voice took on a plaintive, querulous tone—"Still we cannot of Videlia understand why the gods should show favor to the blue lord of Gaanelia, when it is *our* people which have ever been their most ardent followers. All know that the blue ones of Gaanelia are a cynical, impious race. Theirs is a culture of agnostic science. Many, indeed, have declared there are no gods at all, but only primal causes—"

"Hold, my Lady!" interrupted Ramey. "The protector Sugriva is a good man—"

A note of passionate rebellion throbbed in the golden one's voice. "A good man, aye!" she cried witheringly, "In his feeble way! But they are a decadent, dying race, the Gaanelians! Where as we of Videlia—" A tenseness gripped her figure, and the shadowy amber of her breast rose and fell with her emotion—"are a great and growing race, young and strong. As the gods," she cried challengingly, "have much to offer men, so have their followers much to offer the gods! Allegiance and devotion, aye, and sacrifice!"

"Speak you, Lord Ramey—were it not to the gods' own benefit that they should cast down these weaklings of Gaanelia and raise to the heights those who are their own true believers?"

Her meaning was clear. Ramey stared at her with sudden sharp intentness, a warning bell chiming in his ears. Here was open proof of the faithlessness Sugriva had feared. A plea for divine approval of Videlian ambitions. It was a good thing he had come here tonight. He must nip this movement in the bud.

"The gods, my Lady Rakshasi," he said sternly, "desire naught but peace. They will neither sponsor nor permit the elevation of one race over another. All must live in amity."

The golden amazon's excitement died. Her voice lost its challenging note and became softer, throatier, more insinuating. She stirred nearer him, and the silk rustled languid invitation. The warmth of her body touched his own, hip and thigh, and the scent of her hair was a titillation to his nostrils.

"But, say, my Lord," she whispered, "do not even the gods look with favor upon those who please them?"

The warning bell was clamoring brassily now. It rose and fell with the pound of Ramey's pulse. His temples hammered, his lips were parched, and forgotten now were Sugriva and Dr. Aiken, Red, the O'Briens, all those who had accompanied him into this strange adventure.

Even the mist-blue eyes of Sheila Aiken were a far memory, colorless and without warmth.

He choked, "It is . . . true . . . that even a god might look with longing upon . . . one like you, Lady Rakshasi."

And she was closer still, the warmth of her tempting-near, her sleek, golden body yielding to his own, her breath upon his lips.

"Thou and I, if I delight thee, my Lord," she whispered. "Together might we raise Videlia into the power and glory which is rightly its own. With thy mighty arm, and with the strong Bow of Rudra, we will sweep all others before us. Nor shall we stand alone. For, lo—there is even my brother Ravana, whose heart sickens with hunger for the goddess Sheilacita who is in thy train."

Now the warning bell, which had become a faint tolling whisper almost submerged beneath the waves that engulfed Ramey Winters, burst suddenly into full, reverberant cry! With one shrugging movement he had thrust the tawny temptress from him and was on his feet.

"What!" he cried. "Ravana—and Sheila? You mean he *dares*—" His blow flamed with a sudden, red rage; anger that was darker still with the realization of the trap into which he had almost let his senses betray him. "No, Rakshasi! That cannot be! Sheila belongs to *me*! No other man—"

Then he stopped. For the Lady Rakshasi, too, was on her feet,

panting and furious. The dusty emerald of her eyes was now the cold, burning green of glacial ice. Even in her outrage, her quick mind grasped the implication of his words.

"No other *man*, my Lord? Then they were right! Thou are no god, but only a pretender! And Sugriva has lied. Well, he shall pay for his deceit. And you, too, poor modal thing who prefers a pallid shadow to Rakshasi, you, too, shall regret this night. Go!"

She pointed a rage-trembling finger to the door. With a sick helplessness Ramey realized he had spoiled everything. To stay here now, to argue with this unreasoning amazon, would only make matters worse. He left.

In the late morning he woke from a tortured slumber to find Red Barrett leaning over him, shaking him. The brick-top was grinning mockingly.

"Boy, you sure were knocking 'em off. Know what time it is? Almost ten. Stir your stumps, keed; we got stuff and things to do today. Golly, your eyes look like a pair of frayed button-holes! If we was back in our own, honest-to-gosh time, I'd say you was out on a bender last night."

Ramey said drowsily, "Not a bad idea at that. When we do get back to our own time, which I hope will be soon, we'll have to give it a try, Red. A good one."

"Here's your pants," said Red. "Got good news this morning, anyhow. Know what happened during the night? That big, overgrown hunk of yellow nastiness and his gang pulled up stakes and scrambled out of here. I'm sure glad to see the last of him, ain't you? Though I got to admit that sister of his was snappy looking—what's the matter, Ramey?"

Ramey, fully conscious now, was pawing anxiously through the tumbled silks and furs that were his bed. "Where is it?" he demanded. "Have you seen it?"

"Seen what?"

"The Bow!" rasped Ramey. "Rudra's weapon! It was here last night. Now I can't find it anywhere. And—" His eyes suddenly widened—"Ravana left Chitrakuta! Damnation! If he—Come on!"

With the now equally alarmed Red at his heels, Ramey dashed from the chamber. He hadn't far to go. He found the others—Dr. Aiken, both O'Briens, Sheng-ti, Sugriva—in the central court on which his room abutted. They were gathered in a tight knot; as one man they turned at his cry.

"Sugriva!" he called, "Order out the troops! There's trouble

afoot. Red says Ravana left last night—and the Bow of Rudra is gone with him! Well, don't just stand there like that, staring at me! Do something!"

But it was Dr. Aiken who answered. There were white lines about the old man's lips that Ramey had never seen there before. His eyes were hard and worried. "The Bow!" he cried. "The Bow, too, Ramey? You hear that, Sugriva—?"

Despair seemed to settle like a black cloud over the Gaanelian's eyes; his shoulders sagged, and his voice was ominous. "I hear, indeed! And now is our plight truly perilous. For if they have the Bow, too—"

"What's this all about?" roared Ramey. "What do you mean, 'the Bow, too'? What else is missing?"

Syd O'Brien stared at him morbidly. "We don't know how they did it, Ramey," he said, "or why. But when Ravana and his gang pulled out of here before dawn, they not only took with them the Bow of Rudra. They also—kidnapped Sheila!"

CHAPTER XI

The Isle of Slaves

"Sheila!" cried Ramey Winters. "Sheila—kidnapped! But Ravana wouldn't dare! And why should he—?" He stopped suddenly, the full and terrible import of Syd's words dawning upon him. Again he seemed to hear the soft voice of the Lady Rakshasi purring in his ears. "*'Thou and I, my Lord . . . sweeping all others before us. Nor shall we stand alone. For, lo—there is even my brother Ravana, whose heart hungers after the goddess Sheilacita . . .'*"

And Ramey saw, now, the full price he was paying for one careless slip of the tongue last night. So long as he and his companions were considered gods by the superstitious Videlians, none would have dared lay a hand on any of them. But he had dispelled that illusion, and the bold Ravana, aware at last that it was only men with whom he had to deal, had moved toward the accomplishment of his ambitions.

Ramey's fists knotted at his sides. He cried harshly, "Well, what are we waiting for? After them! Sugriva—surely you know which way they went?"

"Without a doubt," admitted the blue lord of Chitrakuta, "to Ravana's island stronghold of Lanka. And—Kohrisan was organizing a company to pursue them. But now he cannot."

"Cannot? Why not?"

"The Bow! Did you not say the Bow had been stolen?"

"Yes, but—"

"If Ravana turns it against us," declared the Gaanelian sombrely, "then are we all destroyed. And the plight of Sheila Aiken is an hundredfold worse."

"But the Bow ain't working," pointed out Red Barrett swiftly. "Ramey and me tried it out. Nothing happened."

Sugriva turned to the young airman eagerly. "Is this true, Ramey Winters?"

Ramey nodded. "I told you about it, my lord, remember? And you said it was just as well it wasn't operating. I pressed all the triggers, or grips, or whatever they are, but nothing happened. Nothing that Red and I could see, anyway. As a matter of fact, we couldn't even figure out what was supposed to happen."

Sugriva said, "You would have seen, my friend, had a charge fueled the Bow. I know not where you made this experiment, but believe me, had its chamber been munitioned, every living thing within range of the Bow's tremendous arc would have instantly withered and flamed in sudden death. Never in the world was there ever a more terrible weapon than that invented by my brother Rudra."

Red said, "You mean the Bow is a sort of a—a heatray, or something?"

"You might call it that," agreed the blue lord. "It might more accurately be termed a projector of *cold* heat."

"Cold heat?" snorted Lake O'Brien. "That's rhetorical jabberwocky! Sounds like 'dark light'!"

Dr. Aiken raised a thoughtful head. "Yes, Lake, but don't forget—there is such a thing as dark light. Rays that span distances invisible, and remain unseen until they touch the object upon which they are focussed. I can conceive of a cold heat which might be similar. A fierce, burning ray which does not expend its force until it touches the living object on which it has been aimed. Is this what you mean, Sugriva?"

The blue lord nodded. "Exactly, my friend. But not necessarily must the Bow be aimed at its target. Whatever it touches, that it consumes. Once—" His eyes clouded and he shook his head sorrowfully—"once, some decades ago when our colonies were first established, we were constrained to employ force against a camp of rebel Earthlings who seized and held one of our citadels. The destruction was—horrible. The entire fortress was seared clean of life. The very stones in the walls melted and ran together."

The maid Evavne spoke. "Yes, my lords, the governor Sugriva

speaks truly. This happened even in my own land. There on a lifeless hill still stands the molten fortress, desolate and parched as if stricken by the lightnings.”*

Ramey Winters was chafing with inactivity. Now he growled, “All right! But even granting the Bow is a frightful weapon, why should that stop us if it is not charged?”

“That is just the point,” Sugriva told him. “It may be charged by now. There is no doubt but that the lord Ravana knows the manner of its fueling.”

“Manner? You mean it requires some strange kind of ammunition?”

“Even so. That which must be fed into the operating chambers is a rare and obscure metal. I doubt that in all Chitrakuta there is sufficient of this precious element to charge the Bow a single time. But Ravana, having plotted this move for a long time, will have secretly stored fuel to gorge its lethal maw. We have no way of knowing, of course. But it would be suicidal to move against Ravana until we do know.”

Red grunted, “Then we’ve got to find out, that’s all! If he ain’t got ammunition for the Bow, we’ve got to close in on him. If he has, somehow we got to get the Bow back. That right, Ramey?”

But it was not Ramey who answered. The reply sprang from an unexpected source. From the *bonze*, Sheng-ti, who now moved forward thoughtfully.

This was a different Sheng-ti from him who had eked out a squalid existence in the labyrinths of Angkor Wat. The elderly priest was clean, erect; eyes which had once veiled lurking mists of insanity now gleamed with shrewd reason.

“I am a man of peace, O my friends,” he said. “Yea, even a priest of the very God of Peace. Yet much have I seen and learned

* “The wrath of Azuria, because the other peoples of this earth would not turn blue to suit her . . . In the vitrified forts of a few parts of Europe we find data that the Humes and Gibbons have disregarded. The vitrified forts surrounding England . . . the vitrified forts of Scotland, Ireland, Brittany and Bohemia.

“Or that, once upon a time, with electric blasts, Azuria tried to swipe this earth clear of the peoples who resisted her. The whitish, or yellowish, or brownish peoples of Scotland, Ireland, Brittany . . . built forts, or already had forts, on hill-tops. Something poured electricity upon them. The stones of these forts exist to this day, vitrified or melted and turned to glass.

“The stones of these forts are vitrified in no reference to cementing them . . . they are cemented here and there, in streaks, as if special blasts had struck, or played, upon them . . .” from *The Book of the Damned* by Charles Fort.—Ed.

in this strange world, much thought since my brain was swept clear of its fog by the lord Sugriva.

"And methinks the Way of Peace, which is the way of the lord Sugriva, now trembles under the blows of the Way of Darkness. Surely my Lord Buddha would advise that in a time like this a man must make a choice.

"So—mark ye! The Lord Ravana knows me not. I have been hid from his sight throughout the days of our stay here. My skin is yellow as that of the natives of these parts. Is there not some way in which I might gain entrance to Ravana's stronghold and there, perchance, regain the stolen weapon?"

Sugriva said slowly, "That might be possible. Yes . . . it is possible . . ."

"Where is this Isle of Lanka?" demanded Ramey hotly.

"Not far from here. But a few hours' journey. It is a tiny island securely situated in the center of a great lake which lies to the south."

"Tonlé Sap!" cried Lake O'Brien with sudden comprehension. "That's the only great lake around these parts!" But Ramey was still pressing the ruler of Chitrakuta breathlessly.

"Your people are artists in many ways, my lord. Say, do they not also know the art of disguise? You have paints and pigments. Can you not darken my skin, make me seem like a wanderer from the Indies, and let me accompany Sheng-ti?"

Sugriva nodded. "Yes, it could be done, my son."

Dr. Aiken cried, "But, no, Ramey! We need you here with us. Let Sheng-ti go alone—"

"I got us into this mess," gritted Ramey, "and it's up to me to get us out again. There's no use talking, Doc, I've made up my mind. The rest of you stay here and plan a campaign against Lanka. Sheng-ti and I are going to get the Bow—and Sheila!"

Thus it was that before the sultry tropic sun hung high in the heavens, two seeming native coolies shuffled down the road that stretched beside the grey and greasy Siem-Reap to the lake called Tonlé Sap. Scuffed sandals shod their feet, loose hats of woven rush shadowed their faces, and the rudest of garments, tattered and begrimed, hung from their shoulders. Only, hot and heavy next to his skin, concealed by the folds of his coolie wrapper, Ramey Winters felt the reassuring bulk of an Army automatic; sole note, in this strange, forgotten world, of a civilization left behind—a civilization not yet born.

The scenery about him was not unfamiliar. The slow years work few changes in areca and coconut. Great, writhing dipto-

carpus trees flung air-roots ten feet in diameter across laboring branches; the sluggish river swelled into stagnant pools aflame with hyacinth and lily; from the all-engulfing jungle whispered the furtive sounds of hotland life. Once a mild, incurious water buffalo rose, snorting, from its muddy wallow to watch their passage; once a gaunt crane rose before them, lifting awkwardly on wings that flailed the sodden air as if too weak to bear their burden.

The scenery was not unfamiliar—save in one respect. The road on which they walked. It was not the typical baked-clay road of the Cambodia Ramey Winters had known. It was a broad and well-paved highway, sturdy enough to bear even the transport of a highly mechanized era. Treading its solid surface, Ramey marveled aloud, as oft before, that such a civilization should have been lost to man's very memory in the mists of time.

"I can't understand, Sheng-ti, what can have brought this great Gaanelian culture to an end. These roads . . . those mighty temples at Chitrakuta . . . the city itself! Why, it is a city of millions!"

The aged *bonze* said quietly, "The jungle is life-in-death, my friend. It is the mother who destroys her young."

"I know, but—"

"Let Man desert his cities for a decade," said Sheng-ti somberly, "and the jungles will reclaim her own. The hardy grass will shatter these roads, impervious to wheel and boot. The tendril will bruise the rock, the soft shoot bring ruin to walls which withstand the battering-ram. Thus ever Nature reclaims such little space as Man borrows for his brief moment."

Ramey said, "I guess you're right. It doesn't take long either, does it? Even in our young country, the United States, we have ghost-towns. Abandoned cities, now overgrown with weeds, already crumbling into decay." And then, because his soldier instincts always lay closer to the front of his mind than any other, his thoughts returned to the main problem confronting them. "What I can't see is just what we're going to do about Ravana, anyway. If that bodyguard is any sample of his army, he has a tough force to overcome. Giants, every one of them. And Sugriva's 'militia' is nothing but a few, scantily-armed companies of trained apes!"

The Buddhist priest glanced at him searchingly "I should not dismiss them so lightly, Ramey Winters."

"But that's all they are! Monkeys masquerading as men. Talking baboons, dressed in mens' clothing—"

His companion made a swift, indecipherable gesture. It might have been one of annoyance; it might have held some unknown religious symbolism. His voice was sharp, reproving.

"You know not whereof you speak, child of a younger culture! Hark ye! We of China are old; much lore had we forgotten before your white-skinned forebears built their first hopeful empire. In our ancient annals are tales . . . legends of those jungle-bred warriors you call 'ape-men.' And great is the honor our elders paid to them. The *Chu-King* tells of a day when their prowess saved all earth for mankind—"

"Maybe so," said Ramey dubiously, "but they don't look much like fighters to me. Their captain—what's his name?—Kohrisan: a posing little jackanapes if I ever saw one."

"And what is Man himself," asked Sheng-ti, "but an ape bereft of his tail? No, Ramey Winters, you have not read aright the character of Kohrisan. I have talked with him. I know that beneath that hairy breast, beneath those over-gaudy habiliments, there beats a heart as warmly human as mine—or yours. It was a great thing the governor Sugriva did when he created out of the beasts of the jungle these new men."

It was Ramey's turn to stare. This was something he had not known before. A marvel it had not occurred to him to question.

"*Created!* Sugriva created—?"

"But, yes; did you not know? Sugriva is a wise man. He realized that the difference between man and the lower ape is slight. And he is a brilliant technician in matters pertaining to the brain. Kohrisan and the troops he leads are jungle creatures educated by Sugriva, given human thought and a knowledge of human tongues by the *vilyisha*.* The governor Sugriva's dream brought to fruition . . . a proud, new race of intelligent beings hand-forged from Nature's rawest materials. A race of new men!"

"New men!" repeated Ramey. "A race of new men!"

"Yes. But, now—" They had rounded a curve in the road; Sheng-ti's voice assumed a note of warning—"Quiet, my son! For we have come to the ferry-port!"

And Ramey saw that the sluggish stream beside which they walked had now widened, disgorging into a gigantic body of water. Its name he knew. It was the Tonlé Sap, the Great Lake of Indo-China. A tremendous expanse of brazen blue, 70 miles long and fifteen wide. And in its center, secure as if surrounded by barrier walls of steel, nestled a mist-veiled island which Ramey knew must be the stronghold of the Martian lord, Ravana. The citadel isle of Lanka.

* *vilyisha*: A Gaanelian machine which transfers knowledge from one brain to another by rearranging the electrical thought-patterns. See Part One.—Ed.

But scant was the attention he could give this place now. For there was great activity before them. On the shore of the lake, but a few hundred yards distant, were numberless quays and wharves. These landing-docks were aswarm with the warriors of Ravana—and others! Small, frightened Annamese, bewildered little yellow men huddled together in tiny groups—no, not merely huddled! Chained! Chained in long queues, saw Ramey, and being herded into an endless stream of ferries shuttling back and forth across the lake!

He turned to Sheng-ti. "Sugriva was right! Ravana is enslaving the natives! These men do not *want* to be taken to Lanka. They're being *forced* there!"

"Quiet!" warned Sheng-ti. A frown creased his forehead; he moved as if to draw Ramey back with him into the shadow of overhanging brush. "This ruins our plan, Ramey Winters. We dare go to Lanka as freemen, but not as slaves—"

His warning, his change of heart, came too late. For interrupting him there came a loud cry from one of the Videlian soldiers. "*Over there! Two more of them!*" And before the pair could move a step, they were surrounded and seized by giant sons of the desert planet.

CHAPTER XII

An Enemy's Life

It mattered little to Ramey Winters that the smallest of the followers of Ravana towered a good head and shoulders above himself. Given a moment's time to prepare for trouble, an opportunity to set himself, he would have gladly matched his wits and strength against that of his captors. If brute power alone were to be considered, neither he nor any Earthman could stand against the giant Videlians. But he had in his belt a Twentieth Century weapon that was, indeed, as the gangsters of Ramey's era had termed it, an "equalizer" . . .

But he did not draw his automatic. The attack was too sudden and too unexpected . . . and by the time he felt hard Videlian hands upon him he did not need the mutely warning glance of Sheng-ti to remind him that this was one time the adage about discretion being the better part of valor well applied.

Meekly he permitted himself to be hauled forward to the quayside, where waited one apparently captain of those who were shipping the new slaves to Lanka. This one scowled as he eyed the new captives.

"Well," he roared in a voice of thunder, "and how did you two get away?"

It was Sheng-ti who answered, smoothly, calmly, ingratiatingly. "We did not 'get away,' my Lord. We have but just arrived. My friend and I are voyagers from distant Penang, come to seek employment in the establishment of the mighty Lord Ravana, whose fame has reached our ears."

"Employment!" The overseer stared at him blankly for a second. Then his laughter burst in a great guffaw. "You'll find employment, all right! Thalakka—chain these fools with the others!"

The one to whom he spoke, himself an officer of rank to judge by his trappings, said, "Chain them, Seshana?"

"Those were my orders."

"Forgive me, sir, but—do you think that is necessary in this case? These men are not captive slaves, being taken to Lanka against their will. They came here of their own volition . . . freely offered their services." Then, hastily, as his superior's brow darkened: "I am returning to the island on the next boat myself, sir. If you wish, I shall see that they are transported thither and turned over to whomever judges such cases."

Seshana said mockingly, "I had not dreamed there was such tenderness within your bosom, Captain Thalakka. Be careful your noble sentiments do not someday send you to languish in the dungeons with that chicken-hearted fool, Vibhishana. But—" He shrugged—"I suppose there's no harm in it. Very well, then. Take them away!"

And he went back to his work with lash and cry as the friendly Videlian led Ramey and Sheng-ti to a boat just preparing to pull out from the wharf. A boatswain cried the command, a dozen oars spidered the surface of the blue water, and the great, awkward transport ferry set forth across the lake. Thus, free men still, but under sufferance only, Ramey and his friend embarked for the island fortress of Ravana.

It was on the journey across the lagoon that Ramey realized for the first time just how great was the problem of defeating the Lord Ravana.

His island citadel lay a good four miles from the shore. Four miles which, in an era that knew no motorboats, no sea-sleds, must necessarily be laboriously traversed in open skiffs propelled by man-power. Even had Ravana not the ammunition wherewith to charge the Bow of Rudra, his archers would find the occupants of invading craft easy prey. And if he had, by now, charged the Bow—

In any event, invasion seemed a complete impossibility. For even should a score, a hundred boatloads of fighters gain the shores of Lanka, the problem still confronted them of gaining entrance to the fortress itself. And as the boat in which they were passengers drew nearer, Ramey saw the high, gray walls of the citadel, the buttressed stanchions lined with watchful warriors, the mighty gates and ramparts, and he knew that never in this world could the ape-soldiers of Sugriva successfully storm this salient.

The single hope remained that he and Sheng-ti could somehow get back the Bow from Ravana. Then battle might not be necessary. Before the threat of its use, the giant leader would be forced to capitulate.

As Ramey pondered thus, Sheng-ti was skillfully prodding the friendly Videlian captain for information that might be of some value. Admiringly he commented on the greatness of the fort toward which they oared. The Martian was pleased.

"It is the mightiest fortress on this strange planet," he boasted pridefully. "Oh, not so strong, perhaps as some on our lovely Videlia. But strong enough to withstand the attack of any enemy *here*. Moreover—" he leaned forward confidentially—"our Lord Ravana has just returned from Chitrakuta with a new and mighty weapon which assures our lasting invulnerability. A magic bow with the power to destroy anything which offends its archer!"

Ramey struggled to mask the eagerness in his eyes, drew an expression of incredulity to his lips.

"A *magic* bow?" he repeated. "How—how know you it is magic? Have you seen it shoot?"

"No-o-o," answered the garrulous Videlian reluctantly. "Not as yet. Our Lord has not seen fit to demonstrate its powers yet. There are certain spells he must cast upon it yet, I understand. But we know its power. Our spies have long time told us—"

Ramey heaved an inward sigh of relief. Then so far the Martian overlord had not yet found the time, or the ammunition to feed the Bow's lethal chamber. But his moment of relief passed as the Videlian continued.

"Not only that, but we have won to our cause even the very gods of this planet! Know you who returned this morn to Lanka with the Lord Ravana? An Earth goddess!"

"Sheila!" cried Ramey.

But fortunately the Videlian misinterpreted his cry. He smiled serenely. "Ah, then she is a goddess of your race?"

Ramey said slowly, "She is . . . of my race . . . yes. And where is this goddess now?"

Captain Thalakka smiled slyly. "Where else but in the apartment next to that of Lord Ravana? They say she and our Lord are to be wed. You hear that, Earthmen? That will convince you that we of Videlia are a superior race, will it not? When your very gods mate with our people?"

It was well he expected no answer, and well he was not looking at Ramey as he spoke. For the young airman's eyes were ablaze with anger, his fists had knotted; he looked very little, at this moment, like the humble laborer he pretended to be. But the trip was almost finished, now, and the boat was drawing awkwardly into a slip before the citadel of Lanka. Wharf, dock and landing-place were aswarm with bustling figures. Slaves disgorged from their vessels now being driven to their quarters, oarsmen readying for a return trip to the mainland, warriors watching the excitement with amused interest . . . even courtiers looking down from an overhanging balcony on the busy scene below. Captain Thalakka called an order to the boatswain, the craft wheeled slowly, stirred into its slip.

And as it did so, another boat, sliding from an adjacent dock, swung with the stream and began to edge lazily toward their own. In an instant, Ramey saw the danger of collision. He cried, "Look out, there! Hard a-port—!"

His cry came too late. The second craft nudged into them; not violently, but with turgid insistence. The oarsmen were caught off balance; there came the *snap!* of splintering wood as oars shattered like matchsticks, a cry of pain as one rower was rammed brutally into the thwarts. Then another cry . . . a shrill scream of terror . . .

Ramey whirled just in time to see Captain Thalakka, who had risen in his place, hurtle out of the boat. Asprawl he hit the water, kicking, flailing frantically.

Ramey's first impulse was to laugh. Captain Thalakka was far from an imposing figure *now*. Dripping like a rain-drenched rat, he came up spluttering. And then—

Went down again! With a bubbling cry of fear!

The laughter died on Ramey's lips as, glancing about him swiftly, he saw that not a companion of Thalakka's had moved a muscle to help their brother-at-arms! Instead, their faces were as pallid as that of the struggling man . . . and every one of them seemed to shrink from doing anything to help.

It took but a word from Sheng-ti to clarify the situation. The single word, "Drowning! He's drowning, Ramey!"

And suddenly Ramey realized that, incredible as it sounded to

an Earthman, this was the absolute truth! Thalakka was a Martian, born of a race whose planet had long been well-nigh waterless, a race whose sluggish canals barely supplied sustenance to the few, hardy plants that sucked their moisture. And the Videlians did not know how to swim! Even in a situation like this, where an Earth child could have paddled his way to safety in the twinkling of an eye, Captain Thalakka's life was in deadly peril!

To think, with Ramey Winters, was to act. It barely mattered that Thalakka was of another race, aye, even of another world. In a flash, the young Earthman was on his feet; then, with a splash, he was diving after the submerged body of the Martian.

His hands, groping for a hold, found Thalakka at the same moment the Videlian's frantic clutch found him. Desperate arms wrapped around his neck, engulfing, swaddling him, choking the breath from his lungs. The Martian's weight was like a leaden anchor, dragging him to the bottom. But there came to Ramey memory of lifesaving drill learned in a college. Instinctively his hands did the proper thing.

Right hand so—on Thalakka's left elbow. Left hand *thus*, on the Martian's right wrist. A twist . . . a shrug . . . and he was behind the Martian, treading water, holding the other man's right arm in a straining hammerlock, gulping in great life-giving draughts of air.

After that, his task was simple. With the Martian's face cupped in his left hand, he kicked out strongly for the boat. Sheng-ti was at the boat-side to grip his burden, lift him over the thwarts. And seconds later, rescued and rescuer were being put safely ashore, ears dinning under the cascading roars of an excited group of onlookers.

Then it was that Captain Thalakka turned to Winters, held forth his hand in a gesture that meant one thing on any world.

"I thank you, man of Earth," he said gratefully. "I owe my life to you. And Thalakka, Captain of the Torthian Guard, will not forget."

"That's all right, chum," grinned Ramey. "A little swim goes good on a hot day like this. But I'd take a few lessons in the Australian crawl, if I were you."

He reached up to brush his dripping hair from his forehead. And as he did so, on his fingers he saw that which brought a sudden spasm of fear to his heart. For the fingers which had brushed his forehead were—yellow-brown! The dye! The dye with which he had been painted had streaked and run!

Even as the knowledge struck him, came corroboration in a cry from the overhanging balcony above his head. A call in tones

that Ramey Winters recognized all too well, the vibrant, bell-like voice of the Lady Rakshasi.

“Warriors! Seize that man! Seize him and guard him well! He is a spy from the camp of our enemy, Sugriva!”

CHAPTER XIII

Vibhishana

After that, the tide of events welled almost too fast for Ramey’s comprehension, certainly too fast for his peace of mind. Again—as on the opposite shore, but this time grimly, tightly—he found himself imprisoned by the powerful arms of Videlian soldiers. He was aware of tossing a mute, apologetic glance in Sheng-ti’s direction, and of seeing the old Buddhist bow his head, hearing the *bonze* mutter, “It is the Will of Him Who watches. You could not have done otherwise, my son.”

Then the Lady Rakshasi herself, a great, golden panther with eyes glinting triumphantly, was before him.

“We meet again—so soon, my Lord Ramaíya?” she asked mockingly. Then to the soldiers, “Take him to my brother!”

Ravana sat in his council-hall, imperiously enthroned on a dais ornamented, Ramey could not help but think dazedly, with all the wealth of the Indies. The Gaanelian lord Sugriva held court in a chamber rich and luxurious, too, but never had its pomp and circumstance compared with such ostentation as this. The richness of Sugriva’s throne-room was that of painstaking artistry, hand-wrought by craftsmen whose hearts were in their work, whose hands loved the tools with which they labored. But Ravana’s throne-room was one vast blaze of opulence! Rarest gems from the far-flung corners of the globe . . . tapestries that seem to flow with restless life . . . teakwood and burnished ebony . . . sandalwood, mother-of-pearl encrusted . . . ivory from tusks so huge one could scarcely conceive the size of the beast which had borne them.

No single man, Ramey Winters knew with swift positiveness, could have gathered together such a display save at the cost of other men’s blood! Each gem that lent its hue to the array seemed to cry a horrid tale of death and sorrow; even the fragrance of rare scents wafting through the room seemed coarsened by an underlying reek of blood and death. Thus the great hall in which the Lord Ravana held court.

The Videlian overlord was toying with an oddly shaped instrument as the captives were brought into his presence. A metal arch

about three feet long, supported by a cross-brace upon which was mounted a sealed cylinder, also of metal. He laid this aside as Ramey and Sheng-ti were prodded before him, but not so swiftly that Ramey could not recognize it. It was the Bow—the Bow of Rudra! And—Ramey's spirits lifted—the very fact that Ravana toyed with it, studying it curiously, was evidence that so far it had not been charged.

For a fleeting instant the Videlian's eyes shadowed with fear as he identified the pair thrust before him. Then his eyes lighted with an expression of unpleasant amusement.

He said mockingly, "And what have we here? It is a swill-drenched alley-cat—No! By my faith, 'tis a man-god! The one who called himself the Lord Ramaíya!" He touched his forehead in a sign of taunting obeisance. "Welcome, my Lord! We had not expected to greet thee so soon in our humble palace."

Poker, thought Ramey suddenly. The good old Yankee game of bluff. There was a bare possibility—

He took a step forward, his head proud, eyes coldly judicial.

"We have come, Lord Ravana," he declared boldly, "to reclaim our Bow. Now I offer you a last and fair opportunity. Return it and the goddess Sheilacita, and we will leave without exacting vengeance for your impiety."

It was a sandy . . . a four-flush sandy with the wrong colored card in the hole . . . but it *almost* worked. The overlord of Lanka stopped smiling; his eyes darted troubledly toward his sister. But the Lady Rakshasi merely laughed, her voice a golden throbbing in the golden room.

"If my Lord Ramaíya be indeed a god," she challenged, "let him prove his omnipotence! Let the Bow return itself to his hand of its accord. Nay, brother. Methinks there be little godlike in this paint-smeared, skulking spy, nor even in his cringing goddess love."

She almost spat the last words. Hearing the spiteful note in her voice, Ramey realized that hell, indeed, has no fury like a woman scorned. The Lady Rakshasi was exacting her vengeance, now, for the moment of ignominy she had experienced when Ramey had rejected her caresses for the gentler love of Sheila Aiken. But he said nothing. There was nothing to say. Ravana, his confidence restored, leaned forward arrogantly.

"And how came these would-be gods hither?"

It was Captain Thalakka who answered. Plainly he did not understand a tithe of what was going on. He said, "They approached our ferry-port on the mainland shore, my Lord, and said

they were wayfarers from distant Penang, come to seek employment in thy service. The—" He nodded toward Ramey uncertainly—"the white-skinned one saved thy servant's life."

"So?" Ravana chuckled. It was not a pleasant sound to hear. "We wonder if he can so easily save his own? Well, Earthman—have you anything to say?"

"One thing," said Ramey. "Have a care, Lord Ravana, lest your lust for power destroy you. The Lord Sugriva knows your plans, and he will not stand idly by to watch their accomplishment."

"Thinks he not? And how, pray, does he plan to stay them? You forget, Lord Ramaíya, that I have now the Weapon. The Bow of Rudra, which burns and destroys."

"You hold its empty shell," stated Ramey assuredly. "The gods alone can waken it to power."

"Then," chuckled Ravana, "must I be one of the gods. For already my captains are gathering the ammunition to feed its chamber. Within the space of days, the Bow will carry a full belly. And when that moment comes—then let the Gaanelian weakling, Surgriva, approach Lanka—if he dares!" Ravana nodded to Captain Thalakka. "Very well, Captain. Take these swine away—"

"A moment!" cried Ramey. "Ravana—the Lady Sheilacita! Where is she?"

Again the Videlian laughed. This time there was a note of pleased anticipation in his voice. "Concern yourself not about the woman, my Lord Ramaíya," he giped. "She awaits my pleasure. Nor shall I keep her waiting long. As soon as these slight matters of state have been cleared up, the Lady Sheilacita will receive the great honor of becoming one of my mates. It is only right and proper, is it not, that the Videlian colony on your earth should some day be peopled with a race born half of earthling blood? You see—" he chuckled coarsely—"I have higher aspirations for the future of your world than has the Lord Sugriva, who would raise to mock manhood the hairy apes of the jungle. Careful, earthman! Dare not my wrath!" His warning halted Ramey's impulsive forward movement. Ravana motioned again to the waiting captain. "I weary of my guests, Captain Thalakka. Take them away. Place them in the dungeons to await my later decision."

He lolled back in his throne, signifying the audience at an end. Captain Thalakka gestured his captives toward the door. As they left the room, there floated high and clear above the nervous hubbub of palace movement, the mocking, bell-like laughter of the Lady Rakshasi . . .

Ramey had guessed, from its exterior, that the citadel on Lanka was a tremendous place. He had not been able to appraise its full enormity from the outside, though. That he realized as Captain Thalakka led him and the silent Sheng-ti through corridor after lofting corridor, past mighty chambers and halls; down, down and ever down into the entrails of the citadel, into the dungeons festering below.

Ever, as they pressed onward and downward, Ramey had an eye peeled for the likely spot, the strategic moment, that might offer escape. But he found none. Lanka was more than a palace, more than mere bulwarked ramparts of stone. It was an armed camp, seething with a seemingly endless host of Videlian giants, its population swelled to thousands by slaves impressed from the children of earth.

So he resigned himself, as he had once before, to a principle of "watchful waiting." Incarceration was not to be his ultimate fate. The Lord Ravana had made that point clear and emphatic. So however deep he might burrow beneath Lanka *now*, there would come a time when he would again see day. If he waited, laid his plans for that time . . .

Curiously enough, it was Captain Thalakka who waxed gloomiest as the trio descended interminable stairs into the black depths of Lanka. The tall, golden-skinned warrior fumed with brooding restlessness, a torment that finally would not be restrained. He turned to Ramey, his eyes haggard.

"Now, Lord Ramaíya," he cried angrily, "am I, Thalakka, Captain of the Torthian Guard, a shamed and sorrowed man! It is iron to my soul that I, who owe you my life, should be the one to lead you to a foul and certain doom!"

Ramey said quietly, "You're just doing your duty, my captain. I don't hold this against you. But—thanks. It's nice to know that all Videlians are not brutes."

"Then I hold it against myself!" groaned the Martian soldier. "As for we of Videlia—" There was a note of bitter savagery in his voice—"Do not judge us all by him who has seized the throne of Lanka. Many of us there are who rue the day he usurped the rulership of this colony, hurling into the dungeons his own brother. Aye, many there are who would gladly live in peace with you earthmen. Had we but the courage and strength to do so—"

Ramey glanced at him swiftly, appraisingly. "Go on, Thalakka!" he encouraged. "What do you mean?"

But the Videlian's jaw had set, as if he feared that already he had said too much. His eyes darted about the gray corridors anxiously, and he whispered, "Speak softly, man of earth. These very

walls have wagging tongues. But, hark ye! In the foul pits we now approach you will find another. One named Vibhishana, blood-brother of the Lord Ravana. Gain him to your cause and—who knows what may transpire?

“For *you*, even though you are my friend and the one to whom I owe my life, I can do little. But were Lord Vibhishana your pledged ally, much might be done on your behalf.”

“You mean—?”

“I mean,” continued the Videlian hurriedly, “that at the middle watch this night I will come to the dungeon gates. If that third one whose name I have already told is with you, I can pledge that there will be guards in the corridors who will turn a blind eye to your passage. And now—” His tone changed abruptly, became harsh, commanding— “Cease thy noisy bleating, serfs! Thank your stupid earth gods thy lives have been spared— Ay! warder, open your doors and rid me of these earthling scum!”

They had stopped, at last, before a huge bronze door at what must be, thought Ramey, judging from the clammy dampness moisturing the walls, the stale and föetid air, the very bottom of the fortress. And at Captain Thalakka’s call, came shuffling to them a gnarled, coarse figure bearing on a great ring the key to the donjon-keep. He squinted at the captives suspiciously.

“Scum indeed, Captain Thalakka! Why sent our leader these earth dogs hither?”

“For safekeeping,” answered Thalakka, “until he finds time to decide their fate.”

The warder grinned evilly. “Then I shall not have to bother with them long,” he hazarded. “Our Lord Ravana is not one to delay his decisions. Well, filth—in with you!” His key grated in the lock; with a scraggly hand he thrust Sheng-ti and Ramey through the portal. “And mind you disturb me not, or I’ll come a-visiting with the lash!”

Again he turned the clef, securing the doorway after them. Then, still chuckling, he shuffled away. But Thalakka pressed his lips once to the grill before he, too, disappeared. And the words he whispered were, “Courage! Tonight!”

Being thrust into these dungeons, Ramey discovered, was unlike being imprisoned in the cell-block of a modern—a 20th Century—jail. Here were no neat, ordered individual cells, no runways with pacing guards, no blazing lights, no clean, steel avenues astringent with the odor of disinfectant. When the gate clanged shut behind him, darkness surged in to engulf him in a maw of

ebon velvet; his feet slipped on damp masonry, and for a moment a sense of panic; fear, instinctive, unreasoning, gripped him.

In that moment, he was glad of the presence of Sheng-ti. For nothing could disturb the smooth complaisance of the aged *bonze*. His hand, upholding Ramey, was warm and serene, his voice reassuring.

"Peace, my son! We are at least alone, and in solitude is strength."

Ramey grinned at him, an invisible grin to an invisible companion. "Thanks, old man," he said. "I guess it's the dark. I went into a tail-spin for a second."

"It is written," said Sheng-ti, "that darkness is naught but the shadow of the gods. Yet, behold! Even now it is not dark. See—in the distance?"

Now that his eyes had accustomed themselves to gloom Ramey saw that, indeed, there was a faint smudge of light before him. By it he recognized that they stood at the threshold of but one of a numberless series of connected chambers; high, vaulted caverns, sturdy-walled and windowless, supported by massive columns which might have been hewn from solid rock. Now, completely in possession of himself again, it was Ramey who took the initiative. He gripped his friend's arm, propelling him forward.

"Where there is light," he said, "there must be men. These dungeons are not tenantless. Come on!"

And together they picked their way, on feet rapidly growing more sure, toward the faraway smudge.

As they drew nearer its source, they discovered that the illumination came from guttering candles, and from small bonfires over which, like so many wraiths huddling from the frightful chill of Limbo, hunkered the figures of other prisoners. Many were these, and of all races. Earthmen and Videlians alike were the exiles of this abandoned gaol. They did not mingle together, but in little clans: groups similar in color or in creed, in physiognomy or faith. Although they shared an identical fate, it was evident by the angry glances which passed between one group and another, by the bickering of individual leaders, that there was strife and distrust between these companies.

An example of this smouldering hatred showed itself as Ramey and Sheng-ti considered which of the groups it were best they should approach.

The apparent leader of one tiny clan, a tall, strong-thewed earthman whose race Ramey would have identified tentatively as

Coptic, had been muttering to himself audibly. Now he rose to his full height, swift decision seeming to fan to a blaze the long-contained flame within him.

"Like dogs! Like mangy dogs filthy with vermin they cage us in this stinking hole! And do we rebel? Nay! Like whipped curs we bow before the cursed Videlians—when even our food and drink must be shared with the castoffs of their race!"

He glowered across the room to another fire, gathered about which was a tiny knot of Videlians. An elderly man looked to be leader of these, for as the Coptic chieftain let loose his blast, one of the Martian prisoners stirred, would have risen to reply had not the older man stayed him.

Fellow of the Copt's clan muttered hoarse approval of his words; from other groups came rumblings of encouragement. But one prisoner—an Erse, Ramey guessed, or perhaps a Cym—laughed sardonically.

"And what would you do about it, Tauthus of Cush?"

The mighty one's eyes glinted in the firelight like shards of flint. "I would talk less," he bellowed in reply, "and act more! I would regain a vestige of my lost manhood, beginning by wreaking vengeance on those who are of the race of our oppressors. Like *this*!"

And like a cat leaping, so swiftly that none could move to deter him, he rushed from his own fire to that where gathered the Videlians. With one blow he felled a startled Martian youth jumping up to meet him. Then, gripping the old man in strong hands, he yanked him to his feet. Light shone on a scrap of metal in his hands, a rude knife painstakingly wrought from a forgotten file.

"Thus," he roared, "to all Videlians!" The raw blade descended . . .

But if all others stood too stunned to move, not so Ramey Winters. A fighting-man himself, he had recognized instantly that there was no-acting in the defiance of Tauthus of Cush. The Copt was in deadly earnest. And even as his arm upraised, Ramey thrust forward boldly into the chamber. His voice ringing unexpectedly loud in the echoing vaults, had the explosive vigor of lightning.

"*Hold!*" he cried. "Strike not, son of Earth!"

As a moment frozen in imperishable pigments, everything stopped! The cry of blood-lusting voices dwindled into shocked silence . . . the upraised arm fell not . . . the straining figures locked in fantastic poses as if carven so. Then with infinite slowness the head of Tauthus turned. His eyes sought and found his accoster, narrowed menacingly.

"And who are you," he rumbled, "to give commands?"

There was still an automatic beneath Ramey's girdle, a weapon which the Videlians, unsuspecting of its nature, had not taken from him. But he made no move to use it. Instead, he stepped forward still farther that the light might shine upon his features. His face was grave and anxious, his tone beseeching.

"An earthman like yourself, Tauthus of Cush. And a prisoner. But one who realizes that in wanton destruction of each other does not lie the way of our salvation."

"The Videlians," said Tauthus grimly, "are our captors and our foes. This aged stick is a Videlian—"

"—and a prisoner," argued Ramey desperately, "like ourselves. Is that not proof enough he is no ally of the Lord Ravana? Evidence that his foe is our foe? If you kill this man, you do a service to the Lord we hate. Can you not hear the laughter of Ravana at learning his prisoners fight amongst themselves, destroy each other?"

And—the battle of words was won! Tauthus of Cush dropped his blade into his belt, released his captive sheepishly and moved away. A man of spirit he was, but he was a man of logic, too. He said thoughtfully, "There is wisdom in what you say, stranger. But, mind you—" And he glared at those who were now circling about them curiously—"let none think cowardice stayed the wrath of Tauthus, or that fellow's guts shall feed the rats!"

"None shall think that, Tauthus," Ramey assured him. "If I read not the future wrongly, the time comes, and it not far removed, when each and every man in this dungeon shall be given the chance to prove his valor."

An eager light flashed in the other man's eyes. He said hoarsely, "What mean you, newcomer?"

"I shall tell you. But first—how many prisoners dwell in these caverns?"

Tauthus shrugged.

"Who knows? Three score, perhaps? Maybe more?"

"Can you gather their group leaders, their captains, for a council?"

The Coptic chieftain nodded. "That I can, and will." To decide, with Tauthus of Cush, was to act. He wheeled away abruptly, began shouting orders. "You . . . and you . . . and you! Haste into the farthest reaches of the dungeon. Gather here all who dare die that they might live again. Hurry—"

Now the white-haired Videlian, who had stood quietly at Ramey's side throughout this interlude, turned to his protector.

"Man of Earth," he said gravely, "I thank you. Not for myself, because my life is of little importance. But for having quelled an act which might have destroyed us all. Can I repay you in any way? What can I do to help this plan you have?"

"Nothing just now, thanks," said Ramey. "Later, perhaps—Wait a minute! You *can* help me. Point out which of the Videlians is known as Vibhishana."

The old man smiled sadly.

"That will not be hard, my friend," he said. "For *I* am—or once was—the Lord Vibhishana."

CHAPTER XIV

Escape

Ramey stared at the claimant incredulously. Surely this man could not be the brother of Lord Ravana! Father or uncle, perhaps. But—

Then, peering more closely at the older man he realized it was not so much age that had whitened Vibhishana's hair, bowed his shoulders, creased and lined his cheeks, as it was privation. Privation, worry and sorrow. And studying the Martian he now could trace a family resemblance. Vibhishana had a nose as aquiline and proud as that of the arrogant Ravana, lips full and delicately-turned as those tempting ones of the Lady Rakshasi. He differed from his younger brother and sister in that his eyes were warm and friendly, where theirs were intense as a windswept flame, his manner was gentle and self-effacing, where theirs was haughty. Said Ramey:

"It is so! Yes, I see it now. You *are* Vibhishana."

"Once Regent," said the older man sorrowfully, "of Videlia's colony on Earth. Now a prisoner in the citadel I once dreamed would be a refuge and gathering-place for every race that treads this planet. Aye, it is a sad end to which my dreams have come, stranger. But who are you? Whence came you here, and why?"

Ramey told him then, briefly, that which had gone before. Vibhishana listened eagerly and—what was more surprising—comprehendingly. Not even was he amazed when Ramey told of the time machine. He but nodded.

"Ah, yes! That would be the invention of the Gaanelian lord, Rudra. He was a brilliant one. He invented also a Bow. A frightful weapon. Had it been mine, never would Ravana have dared rise against me. Where is the Bow now? Does not Sugriva have it?"

"It is here," Ramey told him grimly, "at Lanka. So far it has

done Ravana no good, because it isn't charged for operation. But he has sent his men out to find the precious element which operates it. If he gets the ammunition before we can invade Lanka, I'm afraid the fight will be over. What is this ammunition, anyway?" It was a question that had long puzzled Ramey. "Some rare type of explosive?"

"A metal," explained Vibhishana. "What your tongue would call it, I do not know. We know it as the element *banaratha*. A metal more rare than perfect gold; yea, even rarer than the dull platinum of Earth's frigid poles. You are indeed undone, Ramey Winters, if my brother has located enough of it to fuel the Bow of Rudra." He shook his head sadly. "It is a shame he brings down upon the fair name of Videlia, my power-greedy brother. Whether he win or lose, for ages to come shall the name of my home planet be associated with the thoughts of war, death and conquest."

He spoke, thought Ramey with a strange tingling in his spine, more truly than he knew. And a dim wonderment grew in Ramey that he, a Twentieth Century man, should listen to a prediction made centuries before his birth, and recognize that prophecy to have been fulfilled. For in the world from which Ramey had come, the name of Vibhishana's homeland, Mars, was invariably, inevitably, associated with thoughts of war, death and conquest. And this for no reason known to the memory of living man . . .

But he said, "Then you shared not Ravana's desire?"

"Shared it!" Vibhishana's voice deepened angrily. "You dare accuse me—I am sorry, Ramey Winters. You did not mean to offend, I know. But believe me, never for an instant did I, when I ruled Lanka, harbor any lust for dominion over your people. With the Gaanelian lord I cherished the dream that we of the more advanced cultures might help improve your planet, make it a finer world for your people. All I asked of earthmen was their allegiance, small territorial rights on which to base a sound commerce and a solid economy between our two homelands.

"Perhaps—" he continued almost wistfully— "even more than Sugriva I cherished this hope. For his race, the blue ones of Gaanel, are after all of a different stock. We of Videlia, and you of Earth, are of the same seed. Behold your companion, Ramey Winters. Can you deny that from the same source sprang the root which was to nourish us both?"

There was, indeed, a great similarity between Sheng-ti and Vibhishana. Both were tall, both almost beardless by nature, both ochre-skinned. And the "Mongolian fold," that small, peculiarly

creased fold of flesh which lends obliquity to the typical Oriental eye, was common to both men.

Ramey said, perplexed, "But—but that would indicate that ages before *this* your world must have had intercourse with ours. Yet Sugriva said his planet was the first to develop space-travel—"

"Even the Lord Sugriva can err, Ramey Winters. The dead past buries many secrets. We of Videlia have a legend that our civilization sprang from a planet now vanished from the heavens, a mighty race whose home-world was destroyed in a frightful cataclysm. Who knows but that refugees from this earlier world might have emigrated to each of our two younger ones?*

"But enough of this now. I see the companions of Tauthus are back, bringing with them the captains. For what reason summoned you them?"

Ramey turned to where Tauthus stood chafing impatiently for this palaver to end. As Vibhishana had said, the captains had gathered. And a rougher, tougher, meaner-looking crew, Ramey had never set eyes on in his life. But they were a sight calculated to warm the heart of a fighting man. Ramey stepped into their midst.

"Now, this—" he began— "this is my plan . . ."

Without artificial means, it would have been impossible to tell, in the dungeons beneath Lanka, what hour of day or night it was. No feeblest ray of sunlight ever penetrated the dank depths; skins were colorless, gums sloughing-sore, and hair without lustre amongst those who had lain long in the prison.

But the candles spluttering fitfully upon the walls, and the periodic visits of the gaolers with food and drink, by these had the prisoners managed to maintain some cognizance of what hour it was outside their walls.

Thus, at the middle watch of the night, his campaign mapped out and approved by hastily-selected lieutenants, Ramey Winters waited feverishly by the outer door of the dungeon.

So long he had crouched at this post, so long counted the beat of his pulse in eager expectation, that it seemed to him the hour of appointment must have long since passed. But at last his vigil was rewarded. There came the clanking of harness, the rasp of sandaled feet on harsh stone, and the voice of Captain Thalakka.

* Many astronomers believe the planetoids (or asteroids) which girdle space between Mars and Jupiter are the fragments of a true planet formerly located in that orbit. In his book *Ragnarok*, Ignatius Donnelly suggests that this planet may have been destroyed by a comet.—Ed.

“Warder!”

“Aye? What is it? Who calls?” The shuffling footsteps of the gaoler. “Ah, you again, Captain? What is it?”

“A meeting of all prison guards,” said the Videlian, “on the fourth level. I have come to relieve you so you may attend. You may hand over the keys.”

A long silence. Then: “Mighty unusual!” declared the warder. “Nothing like this ever happened before!”

“These are unusual times. Nothing like an invasion of Lanka was ever attempted before. But the monkey-warriors of Sugriva are even now assembled on the mainland shore, and our defense measures must be studied.”

“Say you so!” There came the jangle of metal passing from one hand to another. “Invasion, eh? Well, I’ll be running along, then. I’ll have more prisoners to take care of when this is over, eh, captain?”

And giggling evilly, the warder shuffled away.

Another slow century dripped by before his footsteps disappeared in the distance. Then came the swift whisper of Captain Thalakka:

“My Lord? My Lord Ramaíya?”

“We are here,” Ramey whispered back. “All three of us. Open swiftly!”

The key grated in the lock, the door swung open, and momentarily blinded by the lights of the corridor, Ramey elbowed forward to freedom. Behind him came Sheng-ti, then Vibhishana, then—

Captain Thalakka so far forgot himself as to loose a little cry. “But—but what is this, Lord Ramaíya! Behind you! The prisoners! This I cannot allow! No! For you, to whom I owe my life, I have risked much that you might escape. But not even for you can I betray the fortress, my Lord Ravana and my comrades-in-arms—”

But a taller, slimmer figure brushed past Ramey Winters to confront the protesting soldier. And:

“Nor even for *me*, Captain?” asked Vibhishana gently.

The warrior stared. Just for a moment. Then a look of humility, in which was strangely mingled joy, flooded into his eyes. He went to one knee. “My Lord!” he breathed. “My Lord Vibhishana! Is it thy will this should be permitted?”

“Not only my will,” said Vibhishana firmly, “but my determination. The hour for vengeance has struck. Tell me, my captain—how many of the old guard stand ready to strike a blow for honor and the elder suzerainty?”

“Many, my Lord,” replied Thalakka humbly. “And many

more when the news of thy release bruits about. The corridors leading to the lakeside port are even now lined with those of my men who love thee above the cruel Ravana. Thus prepared I for thy escape—”

“And thus,” nodded Vibhishana, “shall our earthborn allies return to rally their forces. But meanwhile I remain to gather about me those who would fight my cause. Vanguard of my new army shall be those with whom I languished in these dungeons. Can you arm them?”

Thalakka glanced dubiously at the ragtag aggregation of human flotsam seeping through the bronze gate. He nodded.

“Aye. Even so, my Lord.”

“Then do so. And now, Ramey Winters—” Vibhishana pressed the young American’s shoulder warmly—“for a time we must part. But all of us know the Plan. We shall create a diversion for your escape. Haste to the mainland and bring to Lanka as speedily as possible all the fighting-men Sugriva has gathered. If fortune favors us, we shall have won a foothold on some niche of Lanka. That spot will be your landing-place. Now go—and may the gods go with you!”

Ramey said nothing. But his jaw was set in a line that boded no good for any man who tried to restrain him from his part of the Plan. He glanced at Thalakka. The captain gestured.

“This way, Lord Ramaíya—”

And stealthily the trio moved upward from the bowels of Lanka, while behind them a fledgling army surged from pits of darkness and despair into a world of new hope . . .

Thrice the adventurers passed posts whereat Videlian guards stood watch; thrice a hasty sign, a word from the Captain Thalakka, caused these sentries to glance the other way. Only once had they to pass a warrior whose allegiance was not pledged to Vibhishana, but his brother. And Thalakka brazened his way past this station with a word of explanation.

“Prisoners from the camp of Sugriva. Being taken to the Lord Ravana for questioning.”

And at last, having ascended countless stages, they were in a small chamber through the windows of which blew the sweet, clean night air of lake waters. Here Thalakka halted.

“This room fronts on the waterside. Beyond that door lies a small, private wharf, beside which waits a skiff. It is watched now, but you hide here and wait. I shall return to arm the friends of my Lord Vibhishana. When this is done, these men and those of

my soldiers whom I can trust will attack the third level garrison of the citadel. An alarm will draw the guard from the wharf. When he leaves, you must get to the boat swiftly and flee to the mainland."

Ramey said simply, "We understand, Thalakka. Thank you."

The Videlian captain smiled. "I accept your thanks, Lord Ramaíya, but I need them not. My heart tells me I have done well. Godspeed to you!"

And he was gone. Sheng-ti and Ramey took concealment in convenient shadows, and again embarked on the nerve-wracking experience of waiting . . . waiting . . . waiting . . . until an alarm should sound the moment for their next move.

It came at last, after so long a time that Ramey's muscles were stiff with crouching, his palms damply cold with apprehension, his nerves atingle with flame. It came with a crashing *croo-oo-onge!* of sound that smashed through the corridors of Lanka, rolling and echoing, re-echoing. The beat of a mighty hammer on a monstrous gong.

Then voices shattered the silence of the sleeping citadel, the vaulted avenues rang shrill with the clatter of armed men racing to their appointed posts, and—it may have been pure imagination—from far below Ramey thought his ear detected the harsher cries of battling men, the faint echoes of weapons clashing in combat.

His every instinct yearned to be part of that combat, but such was not his role in the campaign. Lightly he rose from his hiding place, raced across to the windows. As Thalakka had predicted, the curious guard had been drawn from his post by the clamor. By the filtering gleam of a newborn moon, Ramey saw the dock and the tiny, bobbing object at its side.

"All right!" he breathed to Sheng-ti. "Come on!"

And the hopes of his well-wishers were realized. No eye spied them as they clambered through the portal, over a tiny balcony, and down to the lakeside. No voice lifted to question them as they unleashed the rocking craft beside the pier. Elsewhere on Lanka new lights flashed from a score of windows, the cries of captains rallying their men split the quiet night. But as far removed from all this hubbub as two gray ghosts were Ramey Winters and his companion. Silently they slipped boat from wharf, silently dipped blades into the water. And in the space of a dozen breaths, they were off to the distant shore on which dimly gleamed the campfires of the army of Sugriva.

It was a tedious trip for two oarsmen, one of whom had not

touched an oar for twenty years, the other of whose hands was more accustomed to the slim control stick of an airplane. But dimmer and more shadowy in the distance grew the isle of slaves, ever nearer and more cheerful loomed before them the camp toward which they strained. Until at last, they could distinguish figures about the campfires, could almost hear the voices of their friends. And then—

“Ramey! Ramey Winters!” Sheng-ti stopped pulling at his oars, craned back toward his friend. “Hark! I heard the crack of oarlocks—”

Ramey stiffened, his feathering oars shipped swiftly. Over the steady *lap-lap* of lake water he too now heard that which had alarmed the *bonze*. He whispered, “Over that way!”

“Ravana’s men. The rebellion has been subdued, and they’ve come after us!”

Ramey laughed; a short, hard, mirthless husk it was.

“Well, they’ll never take us—now! Not while we’re alive!” He tugged from his waistband that which until now he had avoided using; his automatic. Leveled it uncertainly toward the fear-inspiring sound. Waited . . .

And a cold voice gritted on his eardrums.

“You there in the other boat! Who are you, and what are you doing?”

CHAPTER XV

Land-bridge to Lanka

It is in moments of great stress that man’s emotions play the strangest pranks.

When he heard that voice, Ramey Winters had been on the verge of firing into the pale heart of mist that engulfed him. Now suddenly his fingers were nerveless, the automatic tumbled unheeded from his hand, and his voice cracked with a cry of almost hysterical laughter.

“Red! Red, it’s me—Ramey! And Sheng-ti.”

Now wood scraped wood, another boat loomed dark beside them, and Red Barrett’s hard, familiar features stared across at Ramey. The redhead’s eyes were wide with gladness; with joyous abandon he brandished his own pistol in delighted circles.

“Ramey, you old son-of-a-gun! Am I ever glad to see you! We’d just about given you up for—”

He stopped, hesitant, apologetic. Ramey grinned.

“Dead? Nothing like it, guy. I take a lot of killing. But I

wouldn't like to check out on the friendly accident list. You'd better put that pea-shooter away before you hurt somebody."

Barrett said, "Hold the boat, chum, I'm coming over." To a dim figure in his own craft, "Take this crate home again, James. I won't be needing it no more tonight."

"Who was that with you?" asked Ramey curiously when his friend had safely trans-shipped. "One of the O'Briens?"

"Syd and Lake? No, they're in a huddle with Sugriva and Doc Aiken and Kohrisan. My chauffeur was one of them ape-soldiers. You know what, Ramey? We had them all wrong. You get to know those hairy little guys and they're okay."

"I've been meeting some people like that," Ramey nodded, "myself. How strong a force have you gathered?"

Red said, "Gimme them oars, Sheng-ti. You look like you're pooped. Me and Ramey can take her in from here. You said 'force', keed? Well, now, that all depends. If we was back in the good old Twentieth A.D. I'd say it wasn't worth a hoot in hell. Hitler's blitzers would make hash out of it in something like ten seconds of the first round. But for this day and age, it ain't bad. About six divisions of talking apes, and maybe twice that many natives. But the hell with that. How about you? What have you been doing? And did you get the Bow? And where's Sheila?"

"I'll explain everything," said Ramey, "when we meet the others. Let's dock this jalopy first."

And that," concluded Ramey some time later, "is how things stood when he fled Lanka. Ravana still has the Bow, but it has not yet been charged. Sheila is under lock and key in the innermost chambers of the palace. Vibhishana is fighting to maintain a foothold within the citadel itself. How his fight is coming along we have no way of knowing, but it's a damned sure thing he can't hold out forever. We must come to his assistance, and do it before either his force is wiped out or Ravana fuels the Bow. Or—"

He shrugged expressively. Sugriva finished for him.

"Or Earth," he said soberly, "will be a vassal state to the Videlian overlord for the gods only know how many centuries. Yes, Ramey Winters, we must move—and move fast."

"You have mapped out a campaign?"

"Tentatively. Our native friends are throwing boats together for us . . . boats, rafts, skiffs, anything navigable. Under cover of tomorrow's midnight we had hoped to have enough of these to land a small scouting force. A suicide squadron whose sole pur-

pose would be to effect a landing, open a land salient. If they can hold their ground for twenty-four hours, we should be able to reinforce with another three or four divisions."

Barrett glanced at his friend anxiously.

"Well, Ramey? What do you think of it?"

Ramey shook his head slowly.

"It won't do. It's the old story of Britain in *our* time: 'Too little and too late.' Sheng-ti and I have viewed Lanka and its defenses. Ravana has been preparing for this, Lord Sugriva, ever since he usurped the throne from his blood-brother. Lanka is a gigantic fortress, protected by a horde of armed and ready warriors. They would wipe out our 'token army' before it ever set foot within the castle walls."

The blue lord of Chitrakuta bowed his head sorrowfully. "You are right, my friend. And the fault is mine because I tried ever to espouse the dream of friendship amongst men, art, beauty. I have failed in my duty as a ruler and a protector of earth. I should have anticipated this eventuality and prepared for it."

Dr. Aiken said gently, "It is not your fault, Lord Sugriva, that the hearts of some are good and the hearts of others evil. But—what *can* we do, Ramey?"

"I'm trying to think," fumed Ramey desperately. "I know we must do something—and swiftly!—but the fact remains that we stand here boatless, powerless to move against Ravana's Gibraltar—*Gibraltar!*" He laughed ruefully. "The Isle of Lanka is more secure from invasion than even that bit of rock, because it's farther from the mainland."

Syd O'Brien said gloomily, "Yes, but don't forget, Winters, there's an Achilles' heel to any place if you can only find it. Armies have been trying unsuccessfully to take Gibraltar for centuries. But it's invaded every night by those who know how to do it."

Red Barrett stared at the pessimistic twin, puzzled.

"Invaded? Old Gib invaded? What are you trying to hand us, chum? You mean from the air? But we ain't got no airplanes—"

Dr. Aiken said, "No, Barrett, that's not what Sydney means. He is referring to a well-known fact which has baffled engineers, soldiers and scientists alike for many years: the fact that the Rock of Gibraltar, though a rock-bound island, is 'invaded' and deserted at will by the Barbary Apes."

"The who-berry which?"

"Barbary Apes. The monkeys whose natural habitat is the African coast, some twelve miles distant. How these Apes enter

and leave the Rock is, and has been, and probably always will be a mystery.”*

Ramey said impatiently, “Very interesting. But we’ve no time for legends now, Doctor. Suppose we—”

He was interrupted by the single member of that assemblage least prone to voicing opinions. That one was the monkey captain, Kohrisan. It was hard to read emotion on his curiously wizened face, but his eyes had widened as Dr. Ian Aiken spoke. Now he leaped from his seat excitedly, pushed forward.

“Excuse me, my Lord Janakan,” he chattered in that voice which, though it spoke human words, would always carry a flavor of the jungles whence he had sprung. “Excuse me—but—these invaders you called ‘apes.’ Were they ‘new men’ like myself?”

“Yes, Captain Kohrisan. Quite like yourself. Save that they do not speak the tongue of men—”

“The Burrowers!” cried Kohrisan. “I have heard of them not only at this ‘Jibra altar’ you speak of but here—here at the Lake of Lanka! It may be true, the tales I have heard!” The little warrior was wildly excited now, beside himself with thoughts incomprehensible to the less impetuous humans. “Excuse me, my Lords! Your permission to withdraw, my Lord Sugriva? Thank you!” And without even waiting for the Gaanelian’s acquiescence, he scampered from the meeting.

Red Barrett stared after him, amused.

“Nice little guy, just the same,” he said. “Kind of whacky, maybe, but a lot of humans are that way, too. You were saying, Ramey—?”

“I was saying,” continued Ramey, “that our best bet seems to be another attempt to get the Bow of Rudra. We must give up our dream of an invasion in force. Select a group of our sturdiest fighters, join Vibhishana and somehow gain our way to Ravana’s chamber. Once we have the Bow—”

“We are still powerless,” finished Sugriva. “Hate me, O my friends, for ever thus disrupting your dreams. But the fact remains that we, no more than Ravana, have not the fuel with which to charge the precious weapon!”

Lake O’Brien, who had been strangely silent for one usually so volatile, glanced at Ramey quizzically now.

“*Touché*, Winters,” he acknowledged. “The Bow is no earthly

* This is not mere imaginative fiction. The mystery of the Barbary Apes continues to baffle the military men and cartographers of Gibraltar to this day. These African visitors seem to invade and desert the Rock at will, despite the fact there is no visible connection between the two places.—*Ed.*

use to us if it isn't working. And we have even less likelihood of fueling it within the deadline than has Ravana. Damn his rotten hide," he concluded almost as an afterthought.

It was, thought Ramey Winters with a sickening sense of fate preordained, like standing up against a fighter who outweighed you by fifty pounds. Whose skill and reach and strength were all greater than yours. Every time a plan presented itself, logic came rushing in to overthrow it.

He said, shakenly, "And what is this fuel, Sugriva? Have you none whatsoever at Chitrakuta?"

The blue lord shook his head regretfully.

"Not an ounce, child of earth. It is too rare. My brother Rudra, with all his scientific wisdom, succeeded in deriving only a tiny amount for his purposes from the mines at our disposal. Now all that has been used up.

"It is a metal. A most precious metal, ash-silver in hue, light as the down of a swan's breast, smooth to the touch—"

Ramey surrendered. "Okay," he said haggardly. "I'm licked. That's what Vibhishana told me, too. So I guess my idea wasn't so good, either. We'll have to think of some—"

"*Sugriva!*" That was Dr. Aiken breaking into the conversation. "The rare and precious metal you spoke of—"

"*Banaratha*," supplied the blue lord. "That is its name."

"*Banaratha*," nodded the old archeologist. "Would it by any chance look like—*this?*"

And he brought from his pocket an object, handed it to the Gaanelian. For the first time since they had met him, Sugriva's calm was shattered into a thousand bits. His mouth dropped agape, his eyes widened, he rose, hand half-atremble. "But this—" he cried—"this is *banaratha* itself! The pure metal, the rare and vital gem of metals!"

"Sweet potatoes!" howled Red Barrett. "Now where'd Doc get a hunk of that boogie-woogie stuff? Give me a gander, Doc!" Then, as he craned at the object Sugriva so tremulously held in his palm, his tone changed to one of disappointment. "Why, what's all the shouting about? That stuff's nothing but plain, old everyday—"

"*Aluminum!*" cried Lake O'Brien, glimpsing it. "Now I understand, Doctor! Of course it was rare—in this day and age! Until 1886 aluminum was so rare and so expensive as to be a laboratory curiosity.* Then Charles Martin Hall discovered that an electroly-

*Few modern laymen realize that aluminum, now so commonly used by every household, was, less than a hundred years ago a "precious metal" known only to

sis of bauxite dissolved in cryolite did the trick! So that's the 'rare metal' which fuels the Bow? Then, boys, we're walking ore-mines! Turn out your pockets!"

Ramey Winters had no pockets to turn out. He still wore the garb in which he had first visited Lanka, not having found time yet to change back to more comfortable garments. But his contribution was not needed. Dr. Aiken, Syd and Lake O'Brien, Red Barrett, all wore Twentieth Century clothes. They went to work on themselves, "Like mongrels scratching for fleas!" as Lake O'Brien put it. And the result of their self-appraisal was, a few minutes later, a pile of miscellaneous objects on a table before them which Sugriva declared positively would not only charge, but re-charge and charge yet again the dreadful Bow of Rudra!

Tunic-buttons, "luck-pieces" Barrett had picked up in Shanghai, a belt-buckle, suspender-clips from Syd's gaudy braces . . . these were some of the aluminum items they found on them. The tiny reflector Dr. Aiken had first shown Sugriva, a waterproof match-box from Syd, a patent screw-top container of ephedrine-inhalant used by Lake in hay-fever season . . . these joined the growing pile. It was an amazing assortment of junk. But looking upon it, the time-farers felt new hope dawning within them for the first time since Ravana's flight from Chitrakuta. And Ramey cried exultantly:

"We'll go back to the plan I suggested! We'll take the Bow from Ravana if I have to kill him with my bare hands to do it! We'll reach Lanka if we have to swim there—"

"But—" chattered a shrill and jubilant voice from the doorway—"it will not be necessary to do that, my Lord Ramaíya!"

Ramey whirled to look into the grinning face of the ape-captain, Kohrisan.

"Eh? What's that, Captain? Why not?"

"Because," declared the furry warrior staunchly, "I have won us new allies and found a better way. We will *walk* to the Isle of Lanka!"

CHAPTER XVI

Invasion

"Walk there!" The blue lord of Chitrakuta stared at his small captain confusedly. "Kohrisan, what mean you?"

royal coffers and experimental laboratories. When a method of obtaining it freely from its native ores was finally invented, so inexperienced was the general public in its uses that a company had to be formed to "educate" mankind to its employment. Even today the many uses of aluminum are not yet decided.—*Ed.*

"What I say, my Lord," grinned the 'new man' exuberantly. "When I left thee, I went out even into the jungles to call my less fortunate brothers. They answered my call . . . and here is one of those who will show us the way."

He drew back a flap of the pavilion in which they were gathered. A small, hairy figure edged in cautiously, glanced at the assembled humans and scuttled to Kohrisan's side fearfully.

Kohrisan chattered to the ape in swift monosyllables which meant nothing to the others. The beast's tremors died. Kohrisan turned proudly.

"My brother is a member of that clan which we of the jungles call 'The Burrowers.' They are not dwellers-in-the-trees, like the forest banderlogs. They make their homes in caves and hollows. Aye, and such artificers are they in delving that their tunnels put to shame even the works of their human brothers. Is it not so, O kinsman?"

It was Sugriva, who had spent long years in striving to improve the lot of these lesser men, who understand Kohrisan's meaning first.

"You mean, Captain Kohrisan," he asked breathlessly, "the Burrowers know of such a tunnel—to Lanka?"

"Even so, my Lord. And our brother, here, will show us the entrance to the underground passage." The ape-human grinned, exposing gleaming fangs. "They are clever builders, my brethren. The eyes of man are not keen enough to find the spot whence their passage leaves the mainland; nay, nor even where it disgorges into Lanka's very citadel. But it exists, even as Burrowers elsewhere built the tunnel which leads from Africa to the Altar of Jibra."

Ramey Winters struck his hands together gleefully.

"Then this fight's not over yet! It's just started—and the odds have changed! Come on! Let's see what this tunnel looks like!"

Thus it was that hours later, as the jet curtain of jungle night trembled insecurely at its horizon, threatening to rise at any moment in the pearly flame of tropical dawn, Ramey stood for the second time at the mouth of the cavernous tunnel whose other maw disgorged into the very heart of Ravana's island stronghold.

This time he was accompanied by a mere handful of his friends, and by a single chattering Burrower whose explanations had to be translated by Captain Kohrisan. Behind him were arraigned six full divisions of the ape-warrior's troops. Hairy archers, bows gripped and ready for split-second use, quivers

abristle with shafts of feathered death . . . ape-lancers, stalwartly clenching razor-edged spears . . . ape-swordsmen, fully aware of what this battle meant to them and their kind. A great future, new manhood if it succeeded; a return to jungle savagery for all their kind if it failed.

Heading these was their commander, Kohrisan. The only human companion of Ramey on this expedition was Lake O'Brien, who insisted on becoming a member of the party.

"I'm going with, Winters," he declared flatly. "So take it or leave it!"

Ramey said worriedly, "But it—it's dangerous. We may run plunk into a detachment of Ravana's soldiers, and be wiped out before we even effect an entrance—"

"Sure," assented Lake cheerfully. "And we may bump into trolls and gnomes in yonder tunnel. It looks sinister enough. Stop talking, Ramey. You're wasting time. If anything should happen to you, there ought to be another earthman at Kohrisan's side. Anyhow—" He grinned—"I'd rather walk to Lanka than ride one of those junky boats. I get seasick easy."

Ramey surrendered, not without a secret pleasure at the gay O'Brien twin's insistence. He turned for the last time to Red Barrett.

"Got everything straight, Redhead?"

Barrett nodded.

"Check, pal! We let you get a half hour's start. Then me and Syd pile the other divisions of native soldiers into the boats and row slowly toward Lanka, making as much of a fuss as we can. That'll attract their attention, make 'em split up their forces, and relieve some of the pressure on old Vibby-what's-his name."

"Right! And don't attempt a landing. Stay out of bow-range until you get some sort of signal from us. We'll try to clear a landing-port for you. Well—" Ramey took a deep breath, glanced at Kohrisan—"I guess we're set. Give the command, Captain."

And with the voluble little jungle-creature beside them, chattering, guiding, he and the ape-captain led the way into the underground passage.

Had Ramey Winters been in an exploring, rather than expeditionary, mood he would have found much to marvel at during the ensuing march.

Kohrisan had not exaggerated when he had called his Burrower brethren magnificent artificers. This tunnel, Ramey Winters was forced to concede, was as great an accomplishment as any

ever wrought by supposedly superior Man. For a short space it dipped downward into the earth, out under the lake-shallows, on a gentle incline. Then it straightened, became a passage smooth and straight and true as if bored by a gigantic drill.

It did not provide quite enough headroom for Ramey and Lake. Six-footers each, they soon found their shoulders aching under the strain of walking with heads lowered beneath an arched roofway built to accommodate dwarfish figures. But this was the only inadequacy of the tunnel. In every other respect it was perfect. Its floor was smooth and dry. Its walls were hewn to glassy perfection, and by the light of the torches the wayfarers bore shone with a strange, azure glow.

How this wonder had been wrought was a question that perplexed Ramey, but his one effort to learn met with scant success. Kohrisan could not tell him, and the Burrower would not. Incessant chatterer the ape was, but he refused to tell this secret of his clan. So Ramey shelved the problem for the time being, resolving that at some later date he would try again.*

Four miles lay the Isle of Lanka from the mainland. Approximately an hour's march. When his wristwatch told him his force had reached the halfway mark, Ramey envisioned the scene tran-

* The accompanying news-clipping might have helped Ramey solve the mystery—or might have only furthered his confusion. One truth shines clearly through the webwork of half-knowledge to which man is heir: That there exist in this world many ancient secrets as yet unsolved.—Ed.

Gate To Hell Puzzle Solved By Scientists

LUCERNE, Switzerland (AP.)—Five Lucerne mountaineers have cleared up the mystery of the "Hellenloch," or "Gate to Hell," a cavernous hole in the Niederbaue-nalp.

The cavern—from which the road of subterranean cataracts emerged—was discovered years ago by a party of Alpine climbers, but only a few days ago did scientists venture to descend into it. Using a rope 850 feet long, a windlass and crane, three of the party of five were lowered into the stygian hole. At a depth of 300 feet they found themselves in a "glacier-mill," or "giants's cauldron," said to be the largest ever discovered. It was an immense hollow 36 feet long and 23 feet wide with azure-colored walls that *were smooth as glass and that shone weirdly in the glow of flashlights.*

spiring on the lake's surface, perhaps above their very heads. Now, from the numerous wharves and docks, would be putting out a host of tiny craft filled with soldiers. A cry would rise from the citadel as these invaders were seen. Ravana's guards would be calling the alarm . . . forces now besieging Vibhishana's tiny garrison might be diverted . . . there might even put out from Lanka an opposing "navy" . . .

But he could not concern himself with these things. He and his followers had their own, allotted duty; upon their success or failure hung the whole campaign.

"On!" he said to Kohrisan. "Faster!"

And Lake O'Brien, irrepressible even under circumstances as vital as these, chuckled.

"'Sail on!'" he quoted extravagantly, "'and on! Sail on!'"—Hey, Ramey, old Columbus must have been a bargain-hunter the way he kept yapping about a 'Sale on!'"

Still on they pressed, while moments winged by at a tempo set by the slur of marching feet. And finally came an interruption to their swift progress. The Burrower chattered something to Kohrisan, the ape-captain cried the command to halt. Ramey glanced at him curiously.

"What is it, Captain? Something wrong?"

"Nay, my Lord. But the moment for extra caution is come. Behold the torch in thy hand."

The torch, which had been spluttering illumination in smoky waves before them, was now flaring more brightly. Its resined wood was licked by hungry flames that seemed to leap *forward*.

"Fresh air!" said Ramey. "A draught. Are we nearly there, Kohrisan?"

"Very near, my Lord. It is time to extinguish the torches and move forward silently."

"But we can't see in this darkness," Lake demurred.

"There will be light enough. See?" Kohrisan smothered his own torch against a wall, passed word back that all other torch-bearers should do the same. Soon all the lights were crushed into ash—but still the passageway glowed with a dull, gray illumination emanating from a tiny circle dimly seen before them. "The end of the tunnel, my Lords," whispered Kohrisan. "The moment for attack is ripe."

"And where does the tunnel emerge?" asked Ramey.

But the Burrower's answer was unsatisfactory. "Inside the palace," was the only information Kohrisan got from him. Thus,

unknowing whether the next few minutes would see them stepping forward to greet friends or foes—but with every likelihood pointing toward the latter—the tiny army of invasion again moved forward. This time lightless, voiceless, and on creeping feet.

But at least a portion of their caution was a waste of energies. They need not have spoken in whispers. For as they approached nearer and ever nearer the circle which was the tunnel's exit, there smote their ears in full, reverberant cry the clash and clamor of battle waging wildly! Shouts of men, alive and angry, wounded and in pain, dying and fearful . . . the strident clang of metal upon metal . . . the *whirr!* of arrows seeking fleshy targets . . . these were the sounds which greeted their arrival.

And as they gained the exit, Ramey saw whence originated this tumult. Also he saw, and with a sense of sick despair, why the Burrower ape had boasted his clan's tunnel was so well concealed from the search of men.

For it was bitter battle between troops of Vibhishana and Ravana's hordes upon which Ramey and his rescue squad *looked down!* Down—from a tiny, frieze-embellished exit-hole near the roof of one of Lanka's highest chambers!

Fully fifty feet *below* them waged the conflict . . . a battle between forces hopelessly outmatched. At the front of the decimated rebel group Ramey recognized men he knew, men who had been his companions in the dungeon. His great bulk sturdier still in battle-mail, Tauthus of Cush headed a handful of men desperately striving to hold a narrow doorway. Left flank of this party was protected by soldiers in the livery of Videlia . . . loyalists rallied by Thalakka, whose sword was among their own. Even as Ramey watched, an arrow shattered on the breastplate of the faithful guardsman, and Thalakka tottered and fell, driven to his knees by the sheer driving impact of that shaft.

A glowering foe, seeing Thalakka's plight, leaped forward, stabbing viciously at the fallen man. But as his sword lifted for the destroying blow, the young Martian who had opposed Tauthus yesterday in the gaol sprang forward to parry it with a thrust of his own. Thalakka's attacker fell, blood gushing from a great wound in his breast, and even as he rolled lifeless to the floor, Thalakka was on his feet again.

All this fifty feet below! And they, six fighting divisions, helpless to aid their friends! Ramey whirled to Kohrisan frantically.

"But how do we get down from here?"

Kohrisan grinned. There was fire in the ape-man's eye now. Ramey thought that never had Captain Kohrisan seemed less the

man, more the jungle beast, than now. Battlelust seemed to have thickened even his speech; it was with difficulty, he made the human words intelligible.

But his words were not directed to Ramey. He spoke to the warriors behind him. And they, obediently, sprang to their task. One wrapped his arms round a pillar standing at the lip of the exit. A second gripped the first ape's legs, and himself slipped over the ledge to dangle by his companion's heels. A third clambered over the body of his comrade to dangle a few more feet down the wall. A fourth . . . a fifth . . .

Lake cried hoarsely, "A ladder! A ladder of flesh and blood, Ramey! Of course! It is part of their jungle heritage!"

"But—" said Ramey to Kohrisan—"if one of them be killed? Then the ladder is broken—"

"And it will be rebuilt, Lord Ramaíya!" retorted the captain. "There! Now it reaches the floor below. Forward!"

Ramey said no more. All warfare is a gamble. This was no more desperate a measure than that one nation should hurl the soft bodies of men against the adamant ramparts of machines. Eyes glinting, he let himself over the ledge and hand-over-hand down the living chain that dangled to the room below.

He was but one of many. For now there were other chains . . . swarms of comrades flinging themselves down over the bodies of their brothers. And before his feet had touched the floor, he was surrounded by a force of more agile ape-warriors, turning to him for command. His voice could not be heard in the melee, but a gesture was enough.

"Forward!"

And to the relief of the beleaguered loyalists, like a great brown flood of strength, surged the monkey-soldiers. From the rear they struck, and there were scores of Videlians who fell without ever knowing what hand had struck them down. When finally they whirled to see this new danger descending upon them, already they were outnumbered. It scarcely mattered that one courageous archer broke a chain by piercing the key-man on the ledge. Though a dozen tumbled headlong to the granite floor, instantly a new chain was forged. And in a trice, the complexion of the battle had changed. Now it was Ravana's men, instead of the loyalists, who were on the defensive. Hard-pressed, they withdrew from the doorway they had been attacking. But the moment their pressure was withdrawn, Thalakka and Tauthus roared their followers forward.

Thus, trapped between two forces, attacked alike by fresh and

weary troops, the Videlians fell. Though giants in stature, they were no match for the squat little 'new men' of Chitrakuta. And at length, when the floor of the huge hall ran slippery-red, when the bodies of dead and dying formed a dreadful tapestry on crimsoned stone, the remnants of the doomed battalion surrendered.

Then it was that Ramey, his heart great with gladness, raced to seek those whom strife and a common cause had already bound him into a brotherhood as strong as that of birth.

To the grinning Copt he cried, "Well done, Tauthus of Cush! This is a mighty battle you have won this day!"

And the tall man chuckled in reply, "The credit is thine, Ramaíya. You spoke the truth. There is more joy in this than in squabbling with these few Videlians who are our friends."

Said Thalakka soberly, "You came in the nick of time, my friend. We were hard-pressed. Nor is the battle yet won. Only this small corner of Lanka is now ours to hold. Ravana has yet thousands at his command elsewhere in the citadel."

"And we have thousands more on the way," Ramey promised him. "Ah, my Lord Vibhishana! Have your guards watched the lakefront? Are our troops on the water?"

The elderly ex-ruler of Lanka nodded gravely.

"Their boats hover outside bow-range, Ramaíya. The fleet of Ravana dared not attack Sugriva's larger force, but they are held in deadlock unless we can win them a landing-place. Is that thy plan?"

"That is the plan. Thalakka . . . Tauthus . . . Kohrisan! I leave its accomplishment to you. Somehow you must succeed in winning some section of the beach where our reinforcements may land."

"And you, Lord Ramaíya?" asked Tauthus anxiously.

"Where I go," Ramey told him grimly, "one man must go alone. I am going after the Bow of Rudra, fuel for which I have found. And I have—another reason. Lord Vibhishana, point me the way to Ravana's private chambers."

"Us!" corrected a lone voice.

Ramey turned to find Lake O'Brien at his shoulder. There was determination in the twin's eyes.

"That's right," Lake repeated, "Us! I'm declaring myself in again, Ramey. And shut up! Damned if you're not the arguingest guy I ever met!"

Ramey said firmly, "No, Lake! I was glad you came along with us through the tunnel. But this is *my* job. Because not only is

the Bow in Ravana's quarters but—Sheila is there, too. You won't understand, but—she means more than anything else to me.”

Lake returned his gaze quietly. For once there was no smile on his lips. He said, “But I do understand, Ramey. Perfectly. Because, you see, I have known Sheila Aiken for a long time, too.”

“But you don't feel—” began Ramey hotly. Then he stopped, comprehension finally drawing upon him, sympathy and embarrassment suddenly warm upon his cheeks. “Oh! So it—it's that way? I'm sorry, Lake. I didn't realize—”

“Neither does she,” said Lake O'Brien. “But that's the way it is, Ramey. And always has been.”

Tauthus of Cush was staring at them curiously. Now he said, “I do not quite understand, Lord Ramaíya. What are you going to do?”

And Ramey Winters answered, “It is a two man job we face. Lake and I are both going . . .”

CHAPTER XVII

The Love of Lady Rakshasi

In the period that ensued, Ramey had reason to be glad that Lake O'Brien *had* insisted on accompanying him.

True, the Lord Vibhishana had given him instructions for finding Ravana's chambers. Had Lanka been other than in a state of seige, Ramey could have reached his objective in simple fashion. But it had been impossible to take into account the constant stream of Videlians racing hither and thither through the corridors of the citadel . . . the guards . . . the messengers . . . the armed companies marching to take their emergency battle-posts.

More than once, Ramey and Lake were forced to take refuge in whatever places of concealment offered. More than once they were forced to desert entirely the path they had been following, choose a new route altogether toward their objective. And with each devious turning, Vibhishana's directions became more obscure and confused, until Ramey, at last, knew neither where Ravana's chambers lay nor, indeed, where he himself was!

It was then that Lake O'Brien proved himself an indispensable ally. Educated in architecture, trained in the hard and practical school of active archeology, he displayed an almost psychic sense of location. With fine discernment he *reasoned* his way through the tumultuous labyrinth which was Lanka. Up two levels—“*The Regent's quarters are always in midpalace, Ramey*”—to a series of marble halls, left to that side of the citadel facing the ferry-ports

—“stands to reason his apartment would face the docks, you know”—and finally, justifying the precepts of pure logic, into chambers more sumptuous than any Ramey had laid eyes on since he confronted Ravana in the throne-room.

The passage was swift, but not entirely unimpeded. It was their good fortune, though, that such Videlians as they met along the way were either traveling in groups—in which case the clank of their accountrement served as noisy warning, sending the two to cover—or were single guards, set to watch over a strategic doorway. And as is ever the case where strong walls lend a sense of false security, the guards had grown careless. This was an error for which two who fought paid with their lives. Three more were left gagged and bound in places where they would not easily be discovered.

So at last, came Ramey and Lake to their destination. And reaching there, they experienced the greatest surprise of their entire, hazardous journey. For the doors of Ravana's quarters, which they had fully expected would be guarded by not one man but a whole detachment, were not only without guard—but half ajar!

Ramey said exultantly, “Our army must have him in a dither! He's gone out to supervise the fight and left homeplate unguarded!”

Lake said, “It looks that way, but—it's not logical. Ravana's the kind of guy who looks after his own skin when the going gets tough. If the battle were going against him, he'd be locked in here with a whole damned army at the doors to protect his precious hide. I don't like it!”

Ramey chuckled. “Well, I'll be doggoned! And all this time I thought you were Lake. Hyah, Syd!”

Lake grinned. “Okay. I guess I do sound like the old gloom-monger at that. Well—let's get moving!”

And cautiously they crept through the doorway into the first of a series of connecting chambers which comprised the inner sanctum of Lanka's regent.

All the great courts lay silent. From afar, as if muted by granite blankets, still fitfully came to them the sound of distant fighting. But no footstep, no voice, marred the quiet of this refuge—No!—There *was* the murmur of voices! Ramey gripped his comrade's arm, whispered:

“In there! It sounds like—”

Lake nodded, eyes glinting. “Yes! Sheila!”

Feverishly, they crossed the last open space to the doorway

beyond which they had heard the girl's voice. Revolvers drawn and ready, they inched open this ultimate barrier. As they did so, the faintly-heard drone turned into speech. Ringing defiance in Sheila's sweet, familiar tones.

"No! If I were the last Earth woman left alive and your brother the last male of a thousand worlds, still would my answer be the same! I want no part of Lord Ravana!"

Came the voice of another, a slow, throbbing voice Ramey Winters knew only too well. It was a voice which at once cajoled and taunted.

"Because there is—another, O Lady Sheilacita?"

"Perhaps."

"But if this one were to turn away from thee, and seek his pleasure in another? Say, for example—" In his mind's eye Ramey, though those who spoke were still invisible to him because of a heavy arras veiling the half-open doorway, could envision the languorous lids of the Lady Rakshasi drooping with heavy suggestion—"for example, myself? Then would your faithfulness waver?"

Sheila's answer was steadfast, unshaken, scornful.

"You speak of impossibilities, woman of Videlia."

"Okay!" Ramey nudged Lake. "*Now!*" And he brushed aside the drape, slipped forward into the retiring chamber where conversed the two women. "Well spoken, Sheila! Maybe her Ladyship will wise up to the fact that Earthmen aren't bought and sold with promises—after a while! Don't move!"

He rapped this last to the Lady Rakshasi as, amber cheeks crimsoning, she stirred to rise.

"Stay where you are!" he commanded. "Sheila, come over here. That's right. Now, Rakshasi—where is the Bow your brother stole from me? Speak up! Or by the gods—"

But his answer did not come from the half-open lips of the Videlian princess. It came from a double source; the eyes of Sheila Aiken leaping open in sudden alarm, her cry, "*Ramey! Behind you! Look out!*"—and from a mocking voice accosting him from the chambers through which he had lately come.

"You want the Bow, Lord Ramaíya? It is right here in my hands—charged and eager to speak! Would you care to hear its message?"

Ramey whirled. Smiling mirthlessly, the Bow drawn to his shoulder, advancing toward him was Lord Ravana!

Ramey cried, "He's bluffing, Lake! That Bow's not fueled! Rush him!"

And he ducked into a crouch, leaped a step toward the overlord of Lanka. But Ravana's sharp command was not delivered in the voice of one who tries a ruse. It stopped him short, because it was strident and heavy with assurance.

"*Hold!* Another step and you die! Not only you but your companions, also!"

Indecision trembled through Ramey. Then, measuring his chances, he took the path of caution. There was still a chance Ravana was pulling a fast one, but—Sheila! He must not needlessly imperil her life, or that of Lake. He stood still. But he said, "The Bow is not munitioned, Ravana. If it were you would long since have turned it against those who storm your citadel. You would not waste it upon three individuals."

The grim lord of Lanka smiled at him sourly.

"I have said before, Earthmen, you are clever. You are half right in your conjecture. I cannot use the Bow on those who vainly attack Lanka—and for a reason not hard to explain. So far I have been able to obtain but a minute particle of the precious element. Such a scrap would not hinder an army. But mark me well! It is more than enough to dispose of you and those others who lead the uprising. So dare not my patience! *Seshana!*" He called the name, and at the farther end of the chamber whence he had come appeared that captain whom Ramey had once met on the mainland shore.

"Yes, my Lord?"

"Have a crier call word to my brother, Vibhishana, and to the Gaanelian, Sugriva, skulking off Lanka's shores in a draggle-tailed navy of rafts, that I hold as prisoners not only the Lady Sheilacita but also Lord Ramaíya and the laughing one, Lakshmana. If they bring not an end to these mad hostilities within the hour, warn them these hostages die!"

"Yes, Sire!" Seshana vanished.

Comprehension overwhelmed Ramey Winters, leaving a bitterness on his palate.

"Then it was a trap. The unguarded doors . . . the open way to these chambers . . ."

Ravana laughed. "Aye, a trap, dog of Earth. Sometimes I fear you children of the green planet are all fools! Imagine a warrior idiot enough to leave in his wake an enemy unslain, merely bound! Long since we discovered one you had tied and hidden, learned your intention. The pathway was cleared that you might readier walk into our midst. And now—stand aside, Rakshasi! I will dis-

pose of these creatures who have thrice pitted themselves against me."

Sheila sprang forward with a little cry.

"Dispose! You—you mean you're going to kill them? After having named them hostages against the surrender of our forces?"

"Even so, my Lady," replied Ravana mockingly. "It is not my folly to leave unharmed those who have proven dangerous to me."

"But your word, Lord Ravana! Your word of honor!"

"What Ravana does is to be judged by no man," said the Videlian haughtily.

"You dirty rat!" rasped Lake savagely. "Trick our friends into surrendering to save us, then shoot us anyway. Well—"

His sidelong glance at Ramey was sign enough. It meant what Ramey had been thinking. That if they separated, rushed Ravana simultaneously, one of them might reach him. Ramey's muscles tensed, his lips framed the starting word. But even as he would have cried it, a warmth brushed by him. The Lady Rakshasi, a great, golden panther of a woman, strode past him to confront her brother boldly.

"A moment, my kinsman!" she pleaded. "You cannot do this thing! Have you forgotten our agreement? You pledged me the life of this Earthman, Ramaíya!"

"Stand aside, sister!" ordered Ravana curtly. "No longer do old pledges obtain. Since we struck that pact much has happened. The man has roused the rabble from my dungeons against me . . . threatened my citadel . . . invaded my own private quarters. He must die!"

"He must live!" cried Rakshasi. "Even as you hunger for the Lady Sheilacita, so do I demand this human for myself! For the other I care not; wreak thy vengeance upon him if you will. But—"

And there would never, saw Ramey Winters suddenly, be a better opportunity than this! For sultry-faced, angry, the Lord Ravana had let the Bow slip from his shoulder. His eyes were upon his sister, his grip on the weapon insecure. Ramey's voice was like the crashing of a cymbal.

"*Now, Lake!*"

With the word, he leaped forward, head low, shoulders driving for the Videlian's legs as they had driven at the legs of opposing linesmen years ago. Beside him he felt the reassuring bulk of Lake O'Brien.

Then everything happened at once! His hands met . . . gripped

. . . tightened about flesh. The body of the giant Martian seemed to totter above him; a shod foot lashed viciously into his temple, and great stars sprang from sudden darkness to whirl dazzingly before his eyes. He was aware of his own harsh, grating breath sobbing through his teeth . . . a roar of rage strangely mingled with terror . . . then a violent blast of flame mushrooming before him. Hot, searing flame that crisped the very perspiration from his brow, leaving his flesh baked and raw.

Then the solid thud of a fist meeting flesh . . . Lake O'Brien howling desperately, "My eyes, Ramey! I can't see!" And another soul-sickening sound. That of a woman's voice screaming in shrill, animal agony . . . dying abruptly in a low, choked, ominous gurgle.

Bruised and shaken, burned and dazed, Ramey staggered to his feet. All before him was still a blazing sheen of light, but now this dulled, and he saw that Ravana, still clutching a now-useless Bow, was fleeing across the chamber.

Ramey's automatic was heavy in his blistered palm. He fired it once . . . twice . . . after the rapidly disappearing figure. But in vain. Ravana had scuttled through the door, clanging it closed behind him.

Then, and only then, had Ramey time to look at the others. Lake was still beside him, was even now striving to rise, pawing before him as one who stumbles through a mist. He was groaning, "My eyes, Ramey! Sheila—I can't see!"

Ramey sprang to his side, lifted him. "Easy, old boy! You'll be all right in a sec. The Bow going off in our faces, that's what did it—" But as he stared into his companion's face, saw that Lake's eyes were wide open, the entire cornea that covered his eyeballs a fog of smoky-blue, he realized all too well what had happened.

Lake had looked directly into the flame of the Bow when its charge was released! And its incandescence flaming before him had blinded him as surely as if his eyes had been gouged from his head. Perhaps soaked up—as it had dried every ounce of moisture from Ramey's skin—the aqueous humor of his eyes. Only Ravana's kick, flattening Ramey, closing his eyes, had kept the young airman from sharing an identical fate!

And—Rakshasi?

He glanced about him wildly . . . found her . . . and turned away, shuddering. The Lady Rakshasi, great, golden panther whose every movement had been a lure and a temptation, would move no more. For upon her lithe and vital body had spent itself the full strength of the discharging Bow. That which remained of

her once breathtaking loveliness was a blackened—*something*—not pleasant to look upon.

Nauseated, Ramey covered his eyes. Then Sheila was in his arms, crying, "Ramey! Oh, Ramey, she—she saved your life! Tried to tear the Bow from Ravana—*Lake!*"

Lake said dazedly, frightenedly, "Sheila—I can't see you! Where are you? Everything is black!"

Then a new sound rang clear in the farther chamber; the scuff of hurrying footsteps, the clank of mail. Winters spun to Sheila swiftly.

"Sheila, is there another way out of these chambers—a way leading down to the waterfront? Yes? Good! We've got to get out of here—and quick. Take Lake's other arm. All right, Lake, old boy, hold tight. We're going to get you to Doc Aiken if it's humanly possible!"

And huddled together like three fleeing the storm god's wrath, they raced in the direction that Sheila pointed.

CHAPTER XVIII

Stalemate

Many sensations unfamiliar to a man whose work was purely a man's work had Ramey Winters experienced in regard to Sheila Aiken. From that hour long ago when she had dragged him from the wreckage of his burning Curtis on the plain beside Angkor Wat, he had admired her. Then, beneath the mellow moon of Chitrakuta, he had learned to love her. Now as they fled, side by side, through the avenues of Lanka, he discovered that admiration and love were not the only emotions she roused within him. There was another and stranger bond between them—a bond of fellowship! Sheila Aiken was no soft, comfortable creature to be fondled and amused. No clinging-vine, demanding lavish attention. She was a man's woman—a fighting man's woman—giving as well as receiving, daring the same risks that confronted her mate. Ready as he to fight—and if need be, to die—for the cause they had made their own.

And realizing this, noting the cool, earnest haste with which she directed their passage out of danger, seeing in her white hand the automatic she had taken from the now helpless Lake O'Brien, Ramey Winters felt surging through him a sharp, bright glory that this woman should be his!

He knew, now, that his final doubt had been swept away. Freely, when this travail was ended, he could ask Sheila Aiken to

share life's future with him. For whatever that future might hold in store, he knew she would be a strong and steadfast companion.

These were but instincts, scarcely thoughts, racing through his brain as they hurried down corridors of escape toward that section of Lanka which—if the gods were kind—their friends still held. This was neither the time nor the place to speak of such things. Strength must be husbanded, breath saved, for any danger which might arise. Such as—

Such as *this!* The sound of footsteps in a passageway crossing at right angles before them. Videlian guards, mayhap. Or worse still, a detachment of the fighting force!

Again, as several times before, Ramey motioned the girl to silence, forced her and the quiescent Lake to a spot of concealment until this new threat should pass. He sought a place wherefrom he might view those who passed. There was no way of knowing, in this crisis, what fragment of information might prove of later value. It was wise to learn any and all details of the Videlian strength, location of troops, designs . . .

Thus he lifted his head cautiously from behind the tremendous vase behind which they crouched as the footsteps drew nearer. And thus it was he saw that which broke a cry of gladness from his lips.

"Tauthus!"

The Copt chieftain pivoted. He marched not at the head of an Earthling party, but beside Kohrisan and before a group of the ape-human's warriors.

"Lord Ramaíya! You have found the Lady Sheilacita? And—the Bow?"

Ramey shook his head. "Ravana escaped with it, and with his life. But it is not charged. Nor will it be very soon; that much we have learned."

The monkey-captain moved forward querulously. It was not easy to detect emotion on his simian features, but a note of apprehension was in his voice.

"And the gay one, Lakshmana? He is wounded?"

"Blinded," said Ramey succinctly. "He looked into the Bow's discharging gorge. But—this is not all that remains of our land-force?" He looked with sudden fear on the handful of men led by his two comrades.

Kohrisan shook his head. "Nay, my Lord. We are but a scouting party. Lord Vibhishana and Thalakka have pressed Ravana's

hordes back to the vital wharves. Soon these will be ours, and our reserves can safely land."

"I'm going with you," decided Ramey swiftly. "Someone must take Lake and Sheila back to Vibhishana, though. One of your men will show them the way, Kohrisan?"

"I will do so myself, my Lord. With Tauthus and thyself in command, my company is well led. And there is much information I can bear to the others."

"Good! But have a care, my Captain. Ravana's men are spread somewhere between you and our main force. You run a gauntlet of danger."

Kohrisan said staunchly, "I shall be watchful, Lord Ramaíya. We of the 'new men' know how to face danger."

Ramey Winters could never have dreamed—what man could?—that one day his hand should press the hairy shoulder of a talking ape in firm companionship. But that is what he did now. And he said, "New men, indeed, are you and your comrades, Captain. And as worthy of the name as any."

Plainly, the move was not to Sheila's liking. But she was too good a soldier to demur. And it was evident that Lake must be taken to a place of safety. So she turned with Kohrisan; they disappeared, and Ramey pressed on with Tauthus and the ape-warriors.

As they marched, Tauthus pointed out the purpose of their move. "Our forces have rolled back Ravana's men at every point so far," he said. "We hold the northern chambers of the citadel and all levels below the fourth. Their heaviest concentration, though, is in the southern sector of the isle. This we cannot storm until our reinforcements land. Our boats cannot dock until the wharves are ours. Therefore the wharves must be taken."

"And our fleet?" queried Ramey. "How close does it lie to Lanka's shores?"

But Tauthus answered that question in the easiest of fashions—by pointing. For they had come to the end of the corridor, and stepped through a gateway out onto a balcony. With a start, Ramey realized where they were. On that same ledge from which the Lady Rakshasi had seen and exposed him!

Scarce thirty feet below them lay the wharves. And beyond these, bobbing flakes of black against the sun-silver surface of the lake, thick as skating-bugs on a stagnant bog, hovered the skiffs and rafts which bore the bulk of Sugriva's army.

Studying the salient, Ramey saw with dread despair the insur-

mountable difficulties his allies had to overcome. From the water, the wharves were invulnerable. Defenseless soldiers creeping into land on slow-moving skiffs would be scythed down mercilessly by the bows of the enemy. Nor was there any safe approach to the walled court wherein huddled the dock's defenders. Two high and sturdy walls stretched from the citadel itself down across the beach to the quays. Behind these ramparts a handful of men could withstand an army forever. And the Videlians numbered no mean handful. They swarmed the walls darkly. And at their beck and call, should they find need of additional hands to do their bidding, were the slaves. Two full pens of Earth's natives, locked like cattle in runways adjoining the courtyard.

Ramey said, "There's only one place to establish an offensive against the wharves—and that is from our present vantage-point. But it would be suicidal for us to try it. Maybe if we went back, gathered a stronger force—"

An astonished rumble from the throat of his comrade stopped him.

"Now, by my faith—!" swore Tauthus of Cush.

"What is it?"

"That captain. Look at him! Look closely!"

A small detachment, perhaps a dozen Videlians, had just marched from the interior of the citadel to join the besieged force. Neatly, swiftly, precisely, they swept across the courtyard. None rose to question them. The defenders had other things to think of, for from the southern end of the isle Vibhishana's attackers maintained a steady barrage of bowfire.

Ramey stared at the squad leader, eyes widening.

"It—it's Thalakka! But why—?"

"*Traitor!*" growled Tauthus deep in his throat. "I knew we should never place faith in a cursed Videlian. But Tauthus of Cush knows how to deal with traitors!" His hand flashed to his shoulder, he drew an arrow from his quiver, set it to bowstring, aimed . . .

"*Wait!*" Ramey's hand tensed about the Copt's arm. "This is no treachery but a most courageous deed. See! At the slave-pens—"

For suddenly the intention of Captain Thalakka was clear. Full across the courtyard had he and his men marched unchallenged . . . past posts they might have taken . . . and up to the gates of the slave-pens. And now the little detachment whirled, formed a tight circle before the gates—and a cry rose as Thalakka gripped the sole guardian of those gates, hurled him to the ground, and wrenched the keys from his belt!

In an instant, all was bedlam! Too late the Videlian guards

realized what had happened, identified this enemy in their very midst. Men turned from the walls, a hundred bows turned on the tiny knot of venturers. Feathered death spangled the court.

But the key had grated in the lock! And the gates were open. And Thalakka's voice was raising in clarion cry.

"Earthmen! Rise! Freedom awaits the bold—"

His cry ended in midsentence, his mouth formed a round O of astonishment . . . a circle from which, suddenly, a flood of crimson gushed. His hands leaped to his breast and tore at a shaft buried there almost to its feathered end . . . then he sank to his knees, rolled over, and lay still.

But not in vain had Captain Thalakka died. For at his words a tremendous surge, like the lifting of high sea-waters, swelled through the prison-pens. And scarce had he fallen than a prisoner had whipped the sword from his hands to spring forward. Another . . . and another . . . and the slaves were plunging through the gates like an unleashed flood.

In vain, now, the arrows of the defenders hurtled into the roaring throng. Where one man fell, there were a dozen to charge forward over his body. This was no trained army, crisp, cool, efficient. This was a mob, a mob of men who had tasted slavery—and were now free to turn on their foes with naked hands and claws.

Like beasts they smashed across the courtyard to the ramparts, crushing beneath them all who strove to stay their passage. Like animals they clambered up the walls, flung the Videlians from their posts down to blood-lusting fellows below who literally ripped the Martain guards into bits.

And—the ramparts fell! Nor did Vibhishana give his enemy time to recuperate from this mortal blow. Cheers rose from the loyalist camp, and up the beach stormed the followers of the former regent. Fighting side-by-side with the rebel slaves, they smashed the last, feeble resistance of Ravana's garrison. Then a guidon raised aloft, calling urgent invitation. The host of skating-bugs stirred into motion. And within the space of minutes, the first Gaanelian craft had moored at the docks of Lanka!

Not at all surprisingly, it was Red Barrett—the scrapping old redhead himself—who sprang from the first of the skiffs to dock. Close behind him came Syd O'Brien. The two were met and greeted by Ramey Winters who, with Tauthus, had scorned any slower method of gaining the scene of victory than to clamber headlong and recklessly down the rough walls from the balcony.

Thus, for the first time since ever war's hot flame had breathed over Lanka, met face to face all the captains. In triumphant

conclave they gathered, all those who actively led fighting forces. Vibhishana and Tauthus of Cush, Ramey and Red Barrett, Syd O'Brien. Yet was their joy not complete. For there was one of their number fallen—Thalakka. And yet another whose part in the battle was ended.

"It's all right, Syd," repeated Lake O'Brien. "It's all right, I tell you. I—I don't feel any pain. It's just that I can't see."

Syd O'Brien's face was a thundercloud of rage. "We will find him, Lake," he promised. "And when we do—" His strong, freckled hands whitened on the butt of his revolver. Here was one from whom the Lord Ravana could expect no grain of mercy should their paths ever cross.

Vibhishana said, "Lord Lakshmana must return to the mainland shore. If anyone can repair his vision, that one is the Lord Sugriva. And it were best the girl return, too."

"Me?" cried Sheila indignantly. "I will not! I—"

"Listen, Miss Sheilacita—" Barrett stopped, grinned embarrassedly. "Golly, listen to that! These guys got *me* talking thataway now, too! I mean, Miss *Sheila*—I wish you would go on back and tell Toots I'm okay. She'll kind of be worrying about me, I reckon. Tell her we'll all be coming home as soon as we clean up the rest of this mess."

Ramey said, "Yes, Sheila—please go. Because from now on, I'm afraid this fight isn't going to be very pleasant. Especially—" His eyes were cold—"for His Nibs!"

So Sheila and Lake returned to the mainland. Kohrisan, having completed the rally of his scattered forces, now came to join the conclave. And they took stock of their situation.

"We hold now, my Lords," reported Captain Kohrisan, "all the northern half of Lanka's isle and citadel down to the Sounding Tower which is in the exact middle of the fortress. The wharves which feed to the Chitrakuta mainland are in our hands, too. Ravana still holds the upper levels of the fort, and all the southern sector, as well as the docks which feed to the opposite shore. But these are valueless to him, since the major portion of his fleet was captured by our men."

"Then there's no escape for him," grunted Syd. "We have him bottled up here, eh? Good!"

"But," interposed Vibhishana, "though we continue as the aggressors, he has us as affectively bottled as we him. We dare not leave the island nor relax our vigilance in any of the sectors we hold. He still numbers amongst his followers thousands.

"From now on, it appears to me that the battle must settle into a state of seige. From chamber to chamber, from corridor to corridor, through every room and avenue of Lanka must our forces battle for every new inch of ground."

"And that—" mused Ramey thoughtfully—"is tough going. Suicidal business, as a punk named Adolph in our age is finding out! A deadly stalemate, eh, Lord Vibhishana?"

"I am afraid so, Ramaíya."

Barrett said, "But, lookit here—why can't we just pull stakes off the island entirely? Leave him here to stew in his own gravy, throw a cordon around the lake and make sure he never gets off to pester nobody again—"

Syd O'Brien shook his head.

"That won't do either, Red. Tonlé Sap is too big a lake. Seventy miles long. It would take ten times as many men as we have at our command to maintain a guard about its borders. Sooner or later, Ravana and his soldiers would get away. And, besides—" He glanced at Vibhishana—"there's always the possibility he may succeed in fueling the Bow once more. This time effectively. And if he does, we're licked. Isn't that right?"

"Unhappily," agreed the older man, "it is. No, our effort must be directed toward breaking the deadlock that now exists, somehow rooting him out of his lair."

Ramey said, "This 'Sounding Tower' you spoke of, Kohrisan—what is it?"

"The needle-which-speaks, my Lord."

"The which?"

"Kohrisan," explained Vibhishana, "has given it the name used by the natives. It is really a tower from the top-most chamber of which one can address the entire populace of Lanka in a normal voice, and have his message reach every ear in full, rolling tones. You have seen the talking idols of Chitrakuta?"

"Seen 'em?" chuckled Red. "We was their voice!"

Ramey said, "I understand now. A sort of magnified 'whispering gallery,' eh? But, say—that gives me an idea! Lord Vibhishana, did not Thalakka often say that there were many who would rally to your cause if they knew you had been freed?"

"Aye, even so, Ramaíya."

"And I'll bet a hair," continued Ramey excitedly, "there are plenty of soldiers fighting for Ravana right now who would lay down their arms if they knew who they were being forced to fight! They've been obeying him blindly simply because they don't know what's going on. If we could reach the Sounding Tower—"

“—and tell them the truth—” broke in Vibhishana, “it would shatter the morale of his soldiers. Split them into separate camps. Create rebellion within his very ranks. Aye, Ramaíya, I believe you are right! It is a far stronger likelihood, at any rate, than that we can overwhelm the isle without losing much of our own manpower.”

“Then—” cried Ramey, rising eagerly, “why are we sitting here jabbering? There’s a better place to talk from. Let’s go! No—not all of us. You, my Lord Vibhishana, so the soldiers can hear your voice . . . you, Red, and Kohrisan—”

“—and me,” added Syd O’Brien. “There’s a chance we might meet up with Ravana on the way.”

CHAPTER XIX

“A New Man”

Like a needle of stone rising from the great, gaunt citadel of Lanka was the Sounding Tower. This Ramey saw before he and his companions deserted the open air and dipped once more into the castle itself, seeking the inner passage which led to the tower’s base.

Swift was their passage at first, hurrying through ranks of their own men, sweeping through corridors and ways whose granite floors proved all too well the cost at which the advance had been made. Lord Vibhishana, shaking his head at sight of these grisly scenes, said sorrowfully, “Though we win our cause, yea, even though the last of my brother’s hirelings pay in full for the havoc he has wrought, not in a thousand years shall the citadel of Lanka be cleansed of this horror, this blood and this disgrace. It is a shame upon my soul and on the name of Videlia that these dead lie about us.”

Even the Captain Kohrisan, whose valor Ramey Winters knew well, seemed shaken by what he saw. He said puzzledly, “Would that the Lord Sugriva were here to advise me. I cannot understand. Ever it was my belief that men are kind and noble and good. They are the rulers, the Chosen Ones. Why, then, must they slay and be slain? Even we of the jungles do not wantonly kill. For our loins or bellies, for warmth and safety—for these things only do we attack other beasts.”

Ramey answered him gravely, “In your time and in my own, Kohrisan, man has proven himself more the brute than the mute beasts over whom he claims superiority. Do not ask me why this is; I do not know. All I can hope is that you new men will bring to us something of your own jungle sense.”

A spasm passed over the little ape-human's face. As ever, it was difficult to read what emotion he portrayed. He said anxiously, "You—you do not mock me, Lord Ramaíya?"

"Mock you?"

"The Lord Sugriva, who gave us human speech, human thought, told us we were, indeed, 'new men.' But oftentimes I wonder if this be true—or if he spoke only from kindness and sympathy. It was the habit of Lord Ravana to taunt me and my brethren. 'Parodies of man,' he called us. 'Poor imitations masquerading in human dress—' "

But his plaint was left unanswered. For now they had come to the opening at the base of the tower. A spiral staircase loomed before them, winding around and around the inner wall of the needle to its uppermost chamber. A swift estimate by Ramey placed the tower's height at approximately two hundred feet. It was hard to guess accurately, for the spiral staircase was interrupted now and again by platforms, rendering the top of the tower invisible from below. Shafts of light pierced openings at intervals, but for the most part the needle was shadowy and silent.

In single file, with Vibhishana leading, then Ramey, then Kohrisan and Syd, they started up the staircase. Past one stage . . . then another. A third. At the fourth level the one-time regent of Lanka stopped wistfully for a moment to look down upon his isle through one of the openings. What he saw brought a gasp to his lips, and the others running to his side. He pointed an anxious finger.

"Below! See—warriors approaching the Tower. Was it Tauthus' plan to send a detachment after us, Ramaíya?"

"It was not!" said Ramey bluntly. He followed the direction of his friend's gaze, stared, and pulled back from the opening. "I don't like this."

"What's wrong, Ramey?"

"If I'm not mistaken, that is a detachment of Lord Ravana's men. They're heading for this tower. We're trapped in here!" He thought swiftly for a moment. "Well—no use standing here worrying about. There's only one thing to do. Get to the speaking room and let Vibhishana put on his little broadcast. If need be, we can call for assistance from topside. Tauthus will hear us and send a force to our relief. Come on!"

And at redoubled speed, he plunged forward up the staircase. Past the fifth level and the sixth. To the last chamber. At its entrance he halted triumphantly.

"We ought to be all right now. Let them enter if they want to.

We can talk as long and loud as we wish, and they can't stop us. Moreover, if they try to rush us—"

A grating voice from behind interrupted him.

"I think they will not rush you, Lord Ramaíya. My guardsmen came to the tower's base for only one purpose. To bottle you within its walls.

And Vibhishana cried, "*Ravana!*"

The Lord Ravana smiled. It was a smile that had no amusement in it, and little of brotherly affection. He said, "Ah—it is my own blood-brother! Greetings, Lord Vibhishana. These are giddy heights, are they not, for one grown used to the cool depths of dungeons? *Nay, Ramaíya!*" His cry cracked like a whip. "Reach not for the weapon-which-thunders! Lord Ravana needs not experience the same danger twice to learn its nature. Hurl it to the floor! Aye, and you, too—"

He paused, his brow contracting swiftly as he looked into the face of Syd O'Brien. Something akin to awe broomed his dark features.

"But—but you are Lord Lakshmana! This cannot be! The Lord Lakshmana was blinded. By my own hands—"

Ravana was far from alone. Had he been so, Ramey's gun would long since have barked its lethal message. But behind him, at the entrance of the chamber they had sought, were ranged a detail of his bowmen, weapons poised and ready. Now Ramey said, "The Lord Lakshmana—"

"—needs not sight," interrupted Syd O'Brien suddenly, loudly, "to know that he stands before a dog whom even the lowest gutter might reject. Where are you, Ravana? My hands hunger for your throat—"

And a swift thrill coursed through Ramey as he realized how Syd O'Brien had spun to his advantage Ravana's error. For the sombre twin, eyes fixed and empty, was stumbling forward, groping aimlessly at vacant space.

Ravana laughed, and easily sidestepped Syd's hands. In his own hands dangled the useless Bow of Rudra. With this he jabbed the "blind man's" body tauntingly.

"It will take one with sharper eyes than thine to catch Ravana, Earthman," he gibed. "Aye, this is a curious web of fish my net has seined. A blind man, a weakling and an ape!"

"What are you doing up here, Ravana?" asked Ramey.

"What else but setting the trap for what logic told me would be your next move? It was your intention to speak to my warriors, was it not, brother Vibhishana? Appeal to them, perhaps, to lay

down their arms? Well—you climbed these heights to speak, and speak you shall. But mine shall be the commands you relay. Ah—you would still play games with my, my little mole?" He chuckled and sidestepped again as Syd O'Brien, still lurching with arms outstretched before him like a sleepwalker, touched his sleeve. Deliberately he struck Syd across the cheeks, laughed and stepped back as Syd swung blindly toward him. "Come, brother! Address your soldiers. Bid them lay down their arms. Come—"

He crisped a command to his bowmen. They fell back to admit Vibhishana to the speaking-tower. Momentarily their weapons lowered. And as they did so . . .

"Quick, Ramey! Get the Bow!"

It was the "blind man," Syd O'Brien. Like a flash, he had sprung upon the Lord Ravana, gripped the giant's arms in a viselike clasp, spun him around so he was between the guards and his companions, a living barrier the Videlians dared not risk assaulting.

And instantly Ramey leaped forward. But fast as he moved, there was one even faster who raced before him. The small ape-human, Kohrisan. Like a darting streak of furry brown he was at Ravana's side, wrenching the Bow from the Videlian's hands, crying, "Back, Sidrughna! We have what we need! Back!"

He half-pushed, half-kicked Syd O'Brien away. His prehensile arms locked about the Lord of Lanka like bands of iron. "*Back!*" he cried again.

With a mighty exultation in his heart, Ramey obeyed the monkeycaptain's cry. Herding Vibhishana and Syd before him he whirled and tore for the steps . . . hurtled down them at breakneck speed, ten, fifteen feet to the lower chamber. His free right hand, as he ran, tore at his jacket pocket. The pocket in which he carried that which would fuel the Bow . . .

Then they were in the midway chamber of the tower, and from both top and bottom of the edifice came the hoarse cries of Ravana's men. The chamber had no door. Ramey's gun and that of Syd still lay on the floor above. The Bow must be fueled! And within seconds—or it would be too late!

"Kohrisan!" cried Vibhishana. "Kohrisan!"

The tiny ape-warrior tumbled, rather than ran, down the last few steps, threw himself on the floor of the chamber. He was gasping for breath, crying weakly, "Fuel the Bow, O Ramaíya! Fuel and destroy—"

The cylinder was open. With reckless haste, Ramey pounded the aluminum objects into it, crammed closed the top. It did not matter, now, that the Bow was overcharged. Life hung by a tenuous

hair on this next split-second of time. He roared, "Back from the doorway, Syd! Out of range! *Back!*"

And as Syd charged toward him, there loomed in the doorway Ravana. A raging-mad Ravana flanked by his bowmen. The Videlian's eyes were aflame with hatred, fury.

"This time, dogs," he screamed, "you die!"

To his bowmen he howled a command. The archers' arms drew back. And then—

Ramey pressed the release grip of Rudra's Bow!

What happened next transpired so swiftly that none afterward could find its vision in his memory. There was a whining scream that rose and tore at the eardrums of all who stood behind the Bow. Then a sheet of blue-white flame that sprayed from the Bow's wide arch with the speed of light. Then bursts of crimson, bright and horrible, where had stood men. A searing hiss . . . a crumbling . . . the crash of masonry . . . a frightful gust of heat, the backwash of which blistered even those who stood behind the Bow. And then—silence!

Ramey's fingers fell from the trigger of the Bow as he stared before him dazed, shaken, uncomprehending. Where a moment before a horde of warriors had stood beside Ravana in the doorway, now there was neither Ravana, bowmen—nor doorway! Everything—everything had disappeared! Even the portion of the town wall beyond the doorway. A great, jagged hole, whose edges still dripped molten stone gaped where the Bow's tremendous flame had devoured all.

From the dimness below came howls of terror. There sounded also the blur of running footsteps as the vanguard of Ravana's army fled the base of the tower in stumbling panic.

Ramey cried in a voice that cracked with urgency, "Now, Lord Vibishana! Now is the time to speak! Up swiftly to the sounding-chamber!"

The regent nodded, and was gone. Within the space of seconds his voice was rolling out over all Lanka, speaking words none could help but hear.

"*Hark, Videlians . . . Gaanelians . . . Earthmen . . . all who hear my voice. It is the Lord Vibishana who speaks. Long lay I prisoner in the dungeons of Lanka. Now I am free—*"

"Ramey!" called Syd O'Brien.

"Listen!" replied Ramey. "The sounds of battle below have ended! Everyone is listening to Vibishana—"

"—*Ravana is dead!*" boomed the Videlian overlord. "My

brother is slain, victim of his own lust for power and the dreadful Bow of Rudra. Lay down your arms, all you who followed him. Amnesty will be granted all those who—

"It—it's Kohrisan, Ramey. He wants to talk to you."

Ramey turned. He had not realized until this moment that the squat ape-human had not risen from the chamber floor. Now, hurrying to Kohrisan's side, he understood why. The hairy captain held one fist clenched beneath his right breast. And from beneath the curiously manlike fingers of this hand oozed a sluggish stream of scarlet.

"Kohrisan!" cried Ramey. "The bowmen! One of them loosed his shaft before I pressed the grip—"

The small captain smiled feebly.

"Nay, my Lord," he choked "It was even before that. In the chamber above. When I held Ravana . . ."

"That we might escape! Well, hold on! We'll hurry you down to the citadel. Medical aid—"

"There is no need of that now," whispered Kohrisan. "It is too late for medical aid . . . my Lord. I did what I could . . . Ramaíya. It was what a man . . . a *true* man would have done. Was it not?"

A mist veiled Ramey's eyes, and a tight band knotted about his throat. He answered huskily, "And why should it be otherwise, Kohrisan? You, too, are a true man."

"Nay, my Lord! But a *new* man." Then his eyes, contented and proud at the end, rolled suddenly back, thick, Simian lips drew back from bloodless gums, and Captain Kohrisan was gone. Ramey lowered the tiny body from his knee and stood up.

"There died," he whispered softly, "a human heart in a jungle body . . ."

CHAPTER XX

Children of Legend

"But my Lord Sugriva," argued Ramey desperately, "I see no reason why you should leave Earth now. Our battle is won. Ravana is dead, Vibhishana sits on the throne of Lanka and henceforth there will be peace between Gaanelians, Videlians, and the children of this planet. Your guidance and advice are needed if Earth's civilization is ever to attain great heights. Earth has need of you—"

But the blue-skinned Gaanelian shook his head sadly.

"No, Ramaíya. Earth needs no tutelage from an outside source. Vibhishana and I have pondered deeply, and our decisions

agree. Our two planets established colonies here with the intention of sparing your young world the woes and hardships through which our civilizations passed.

"But our experiment was a failure—nor was this the fault of Earthmen, but ourselves. I was a weakling and a dreamer; one ambassador from Videlia proved himself a power-lusting tyrant. It was an evil example we set those whom we presumed to instruct. Therefore, we shall return to our own worlds, leaving Earth's children to work out their own destinies. With me shall go the 'new men,' for now, too late, I realize it was a dreadful wrong I did them when I made them neither man nor beast, but part one, part the other."

Vibhishana said soberly, "Sugriva speaks truly, my son. What great Plan governs the actions of all intelligent beings, I do not know. But this much is certain: that no one race should presume to set up rulership over all others. I am a son of cloud-cloaked Videlia, Sugriva of the desert world. To these planets, when the next space-vessel arrives some months hence, we shall return—forever. Nor shall men of our planets ever again set conquering foot on Earth. That we pledge.

"Perhaps not again shall children of our three worlds meet until, in future ages, Earthmen have developed a culture equal to ours. Then, not as rulers and serfs but as equals all shall we form a solar trinity."

Ramey said, "It is not mine to argue with you. But what is your plan for us?"

"The decision is yours to make. You may stay here, if you so desire, or return to the future era whence you came. The time-machine waits below. You know the method of its operation."

Ramey stared at the huge idol standing on the dais before them. The great altar of Chitrakuta seemed to await his decision breathlessly, as did the girl whose hand touched his own. Ramey turned to Sheila. "Well?" he asked.

"We return," she said simply. "Isn't that what you want, Ramey?"

Ramey nodded. It was his own desire. To return to the world he knew best. He grinned and turned to the others.

"Well—that's it, then. All aboard, gang. Time-machine leaves on Track 3 in five minutes."

But curiously none stepped forward to join him and Sheila. Red stared at his companions impatiently.

"Well, what's the matter? Doc, are you ready?"

Dr. Aiken coughed apologetically.

"Sheila, my dear," he said to his daughter, "I—I am not returning with you. I am an old man. There is not a great deal of time remaining in the hourglass of my years: I would spend those last remaining sands seeing new things, learning secrets all men have longed to know. Sugriva has said I may return with him to Gaanel. It is a temptation too great to resist. You—you understand, my dear?"

Sheila cried, "But if you don't return, daddy, then neither will we. Ramey and I will remain with you—"

"No!" the archeologist's voice was firm. "No," you must return! Someone must carry back to the Twentieth Century a knowledge of what we have seen and done here in a forgotten age. You bear precious knowledge, vital information, to Earth's scientists. You alone can read the cipher of Angkor Wat, tell men whence it came and why and where vanished its once mighty populace."

Ramey said, "We alone? But you speak as if Sheila and I were the only ones returning!"

Syd O'Brien spoke for the twins. He said, "I can't take Lake back to our time now, Ramey. The machine would set us in a desolate spot, perhaps in danger. And he is blind. Here he can receive medical care. Perhaps, later on, after Sugriva has lifted the veil from Lake's eyes—as he has said he can and will—we will join you again. But for the time being—Well, you see how it is."

"Then you, Red? You're surely coming with us?"

Red Barrett shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot.

"Well, keed—I think maybe I'd better not. I asked Sugriva about Toots, here. He tells me she couldn't take a ride in the time-machine without being—well, without having happen to her what happened to Rudra. You see, she wouldn't have no true existence in the future. So—so I think I'll just stick around for a while. Me and Evavne is going back to Britain, where she comes from. Maybe I can be some help to them folks of her'n. Like—" he grinned suddenly—"like teaching 'em to talk good English instead of that stuff they talk now."

"And you, Sheng-ti?"

The *bonze* said quietly, "When Sugriva leaves, Ramey Winters, departs from Earth for many centuries the light of wisdom, peace and truth. These people, though they were born in a different era, are still my people. Someone must stay at Chitrakuta to help them re-establish themselves on a new footing. It is my clear and simple duty to be this one."

"Were the choice mine, Ramaíya," said Tauthus, "I would visit

that future world of thine. But I cannot. So, like Sheng-ti, I shall go to my people. Much have I learned here at Chitrakuta; much more will the Lord Sugriva teach me. Then will I hie westward to bring something of the Gaanelian culture to my race."

Thus told each member of the party his intentions. Nor would argument sway any from his decision. And so it was that, some time later, Sheila and Ramey stood alone beside the trapway to the time-machine of Rudra. Their last farewells had been made, the last hand shaken. Unless in years to come others should make the journey.

"When you return," Dr. Aiken bade them anxiously, "read well and carefully the wall-graven scripts at Angkor Wat. Before we leave Chitrakuta we shall see that all this history is carven on the walls. That and much other knowledge, lest your memories fail you. Remember!"

"We will remember," promised Ramey. Then he handed Sheila into the metal cube out of which—was it days, weeks or a lifetime ago?—they had risen into the strange, stirring world of the past. The trapdoor closed above them with a *clang!* of finality. Ramey moved to the lever which hurled the machine through Time . . . pressed it. . . .

When the needle had at last traversed the dial, betokening the end of their journey, Ramey climbed once again to the trapdoor which was the machine's exit. Cautiously he lifted it an inch . . . then a foot . . . then threw it back with a cry of gay relief.

"Empty, Sheila! The Japs have gone. I guess they got tired of looking for us." He chuckled. "No wonder. After all, we were there a couple of weeks. Coming?"

He helped her from the cubicle. Then, remembering Sugriva's last instructions, he set the dial of the machine to its return position, hooked a length of fine wire about the control lever and spun the length of the wire through the trapdoor into the altar-room wherein they stood.

"This is our key," he said, "to them. And theirs to us. The doorway to Chitrakuta is always open so long as it remains."

And he pulled the wire. They heard no sound, felt no tremor, but as if it were a wraith dissolving in weaving mists, the outline of the time-cube thinned . . . wavered . . . and disappeared. Only a length of fine wire, whose dangling end hung curiously taut in midair, lent reassurance that the way to another world was still open. Ramey coiled the wire and concealed it beneath the pedi-

ment of a statue. Then he rose, emotions strangely chaotic. A sadness was upon him at leaving comrades behind with whom he had fought and laughed and lived a great adventure. But he was glad, too, to be back in a world he knew, a world he could understand. . . .

A call from Sheila roused him from his brief reverie. "See, Ramey? This was one of the carvings which always puzzled us most. Its meaning was obscure—then. But now it is simple to read."

And she pointed to one of the huge scenes carved on the temple walls. The scene of a frightful battle, a battle being waged by apes strangely garbed in the habiliments of men and towering giants. One corner of the great stone tapestry showed a fleet of crowded ships rushing in to a harbor, still another showed an ape-human dying with a great wound in his breast, while beside him, loosing a lightning bolt from a gigantic bow, stood a man.

"Then they *did* carve the record!" said Ramey hallowedly. "It—it gives me the creeps, Sheila. We just left them. We know they're still alive, and that this artistry is not yet even planned. But here it is—and here it has been for five thousand years. The story of the battle for Lanka."

"And its hero?" queried Sheila oddly. "Ramey—do you know the full meaning of this story? The earth legend which has grown up about it?"

"Legend? You mean there is a legend about *this*?"

"About *us*!" Comprehension, which had been dawning slowly in Sheila's eyes, now flamed sudden and complete. "I see it all now! All! But surely daddy must have—Yes! He did—at the end. That is why he insisted we must return to our time. To clear up the ancient mystery—"

"What legend?" repeated Ramey perplexedly. "It's all over my head, Sheila. I don't get-it at all."

"Then listen! Does this make sense to you, Ramey? '*And there were in those days four companions, Rama, Bharata, and the twins, Lakshmana and Satrughna—*'"

"Hey! Those sound like the whacky handles we were tagged with at Chitrakuta! They called me 'Ramaíya,' and Lake was 'Lakshmana'—the smiling one—while Syd was 'Sidrughna'—the frowning one—"

"There would be slight changes," agreed the girl excitedly, "*over a period of centuries. Pronunciation and spelling would change, of course. The legend goes on: 'Rama, by possession of an*

enormous Bow, formerly the dreaded weapon of the god Rudra, wins for a wife Sita, daughter of Janaka. Rama attracts the attention of a female demon, Rakshasi, and infuriated by his rejection of her advances, she inspires her brother Ravana with love for Sita.

*“In consequence of this, the latter is carried off by him to his capital, Lanka. Rama sets out with his companions to her rescue. After numerous adventures they enter into an agreement with Sugriva, king of the monkeys, and with the monkey-general, ‘Anuman—’ ” **

“‘Anuman!’ ” repeated Ramey. “A new man! So in the legend his fondest dream becomes his name? But what is this legend, Sheila? An obscure folktale—?”

“It goes on,” half-laughed, half-sobbed the girl, “to tell of the attack on Lanka . . . the bridge built by the monkeys . . . Ravana’s death at Rama’s hands! Everything is in it, Ramey—everything we have known and lived! An obscure folk-tale! It is anything but that. It is a tale from the *Ramayana*—one of the Sacred Books of the Hindu religion!

“You are—or were—the prototype of a hero worshipped by a quarter of a billion humans in our day . . . the third greatest religion in the world. You, Ramey, are the god Rama!” **

Ramey stared at her dazedly. “You mean,” he said, “that the adventures through which we have just lived were not of our own making? That they happened before, ages ago in Man’s history?” **

“Yes, Ramey. Don’t you see—that adventure has always happened! This solves the argument daddy and Syd had about the immutability of Time. What things are, were, and always, will be. Centuries ago, into ancient Chitrakuta came seven strangers from a future world. Having found their way into a Time which was not theirs, it had to be that when their Time came they must return to fulfill adventures written in the book of used-to-be.

* The persistent legend of a monkey-leader named ‘Anuman (or Hanuman) is one of the oldest and best-loved tales of Asiatic peoples. His name and a record of his deeds may be found in the ancient records of practically all Oriental sects.—Ed.

** The reader is recommended to a closer examination of the *Ramayana*, sacred book of the Hindus, procurable in an inexpensive edition at almost any well-stocked library. The portion here reduced to its essentials is but one of many amazingly fascinating sections.

In connection with this, it is interesting to note that the god Rama is considered to be but one of the seven Avatars (or reincarnations) of the god Vishnu. Hindu theosophy admits of many things scoffed at by modern, practical science: reincarnation, demoniac possession and “invasion of other world creatures being but a few.—Ed.

"Your crashing here at Angkor Wat . . . our escape in the time-machine . . . these events had to take place in order that an ancient legend might be fulfilled. That was our predestined path, and there was never anything we could have done to change it. It was as stoppable as a glacier."

"And—and the others? Sheng-ti? Tauthus?"

Sheila's brows congealed. "I do not know—exactly. It is told that an ancient king of the yellow race, he whose name gave a mighty empire its name, was called 'Ching-tse.' And Tauthus of Cush—ancient Cush became Egypt, you know. And the Egyptian records claim their 'light-bringer' to have been a god named 'Thoth.' . . ."

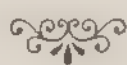
But not now, nor soon, nor perhaps ever could these strange wonders be decided. Nor did it seem to Ramey Winters that they should linger longer, at this time, in the cold, forsaken walls of Angkor Wat. So gently he drew the girl from before the panel.

"We must go now, Sheila. There is much we must do here, but now is not the time to do it. Much may have happened since we left. War threatens Indo-China; for all we know war may have started since we left. We have the food and blankets Sugriva gave us. A long journey lies before us to Thailand. To friends and safety. We'd better get on our way."

So stepped the two from Angkor's lonely halls into the green-veiled sunlight of the tropics. Gray were the walls and spires they left behind, but grim no longer, nor menacing to two who knew their story. Someday, knew Ramey Winters, someday when war's insanity had died in mankind's bosom, they would return to read more fully the carven messages of friends they knew and loved. Someday. . . .

But not now. Now they must leave gray Angkor and seek their future beyond the flaming jungle-lands. Long was the way, and dangerous perhaps; apes chattered in branches carpeted with moss; marsh and morass, wild beast and wilder man, these were the hazards they must pass.

Yet somehow they felt no fear. There was lightness in their hearts and in their steps as hand-in-hand they stepped forward to meet whatever fate might bring.



“Order Out of Chaos”

*Attempting to make some
Order Out of Chaos*

In selecting the contents of this book I was not merely astonished but somewhat dismayed to discover that not just one but three of the stories had the word Chaos in their titles.

“Did I really say that?” I asked myself. And going back to my daybooks and typescript carbons I found that I had not; that two of these duplications had been added by their magazine editors.

I am, it turns out, solely responsible for the word appearing in “Pawns of Chaos.” But the story herein listed as “Colossus of Chaos” was originally simply “Colossus,” and the character named in the story was originally indelicately known as Captain Slops!

What motivated these title changes? Well, for one thing, the idiosyncracies of the magazine editors. Palmer, Margulies, Reiss, even the revered John Campbell, were forever seeking thrill words to enhance a story’s title.

If a pulp editor had titled *The Scarlet Letter* he might have named it *How Hester Won Her “A”*.

Anyhow, in this book the three Chaos stories appear under their magazine titles. But I still like mine better!

Nelson S. Bond



Colossus of Chaos

IT was the evil spawn of lifeless space. drifting aimlessly until IT's sinister birthing place should come. And finding that abode for life, IT grew, sucking energy from Terra itself—gathering strength for that time when all should flee before IT's malign wrath.

OUT OF THE DARKNESS IT CAME. OUT OF THE grim, bleak, frore, incalculable depths of outer space, into the empire of light and warmth . . . and life.

It was like nothing known to Man. It was round, but not quite round; It was hard, but not altogether hard; It was cold, but not cold with the terrible, utter iciness of things which come from Beyond. It was in motion but It did not move of its own volition, for It was quiescent, insensate. It let Itself be carried by the vagrant and unpredictable whims of a kinetic universe, confident that in a day . . . or a century . . . or a thousand, thousand centuries . . . the fitful fingers of chance would find for It a bourne, a resting-place.

Out of the night It came . . . the endless, impenetrable night which spans the void between star and star. Out of one cosmos into another; out of oblivion into waking horror.

No eye beheld Its coming. None saw Its faint, thin, cool iridescence; no voice lifted to challenge Its arrival on the sixth satellite of the sixth solar planet. It dropped to earth unwatched, rolled a brief, sluggish way, then rested in a deep, soft, sandy pit.

A gray hoar-frost rimed Its surface as the warmth of a friendly orb dispelled the frightful chill of space; a pale mist rose from Its



petroid carapace and trembled into the air like a wan and restless ghost.

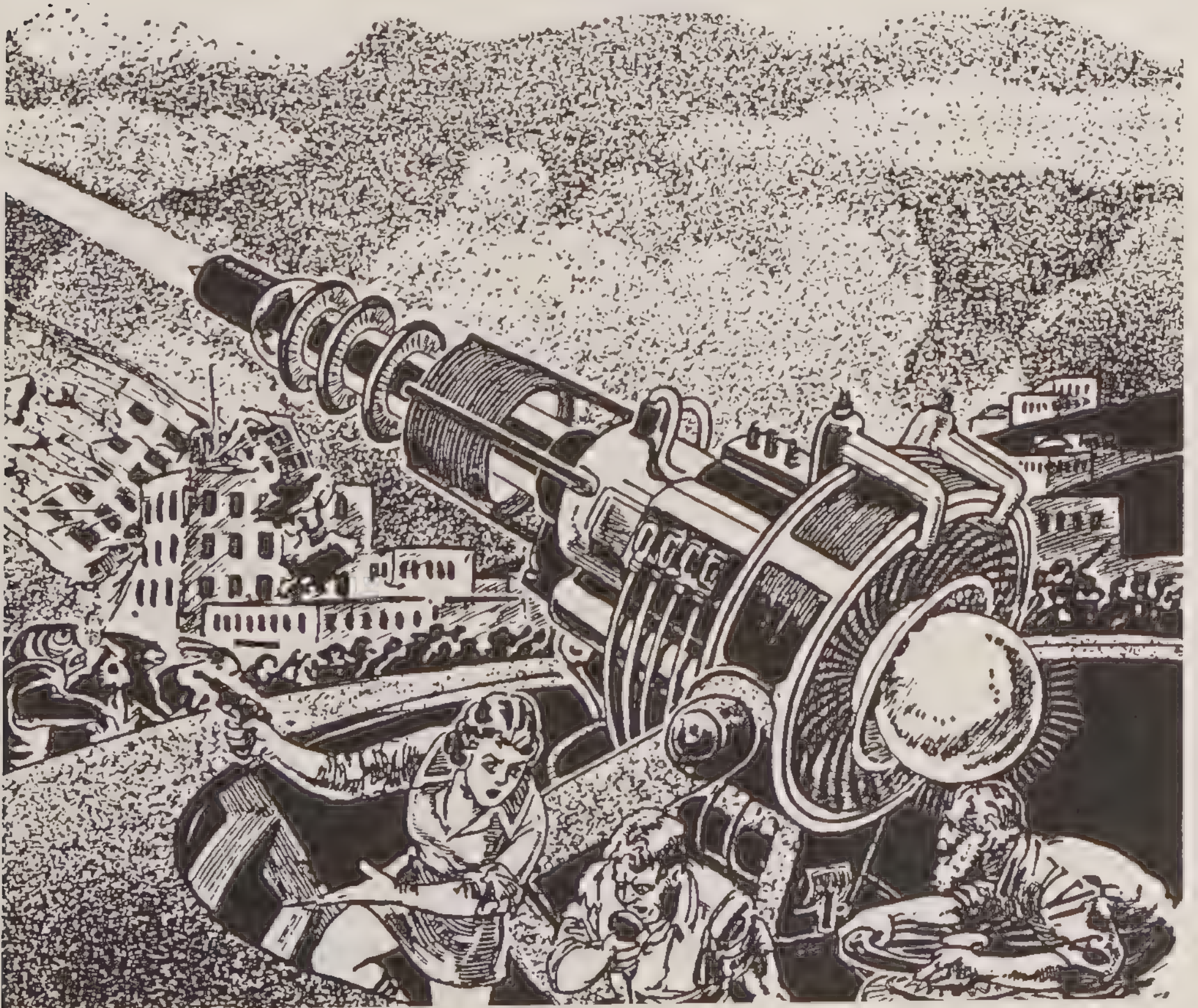
It had found a home, a lair, a birthingplace. With a slow, ecstatic, burrowing motion It dug Itself still deeper into the nourishing sands. It had arrived. It grew. . . .

I

"A dangerous place," said the heavy man with ominous deliberation. "A most dangerous place!" He raised his glass to his nostrils, passed it back and forth appreciatively, and rolled a single drop of the liqueur upon his tongue. A smile creased his full, red lips. "Excellent, my dear Captain!" he approved. "A most superior brandy. Allow me to congratulate you. Domrémy-Thol '98, I should judge?"

Captain Burke, skipper of the IPS space-cruiser *Gaea*, basked in the sunshine of his passenger's approbation.

He swirled the liquor in his frosted glass, glanced about the table with a self-satisfied complacency that was almost ludicrous.



Then he nodded his head slowly, acknowledging the compliment bestowed upon his judgment in selecting the after-dinner liquor.

"Allow me," he corrected, "to congratulate you, sir, on a truly magnificent palate. You have named the exact vine and season. But . . . danger? You spoke of danger?"

The connoisseur glanced at the young lady across the table and permitted his eyebrows to arch significantly.

"Perhaps it would be better to abandon the subject," he suggested. "After all, I do not wish to cause Miss Graham undue alarm—"

The girl laughed. She did not seem, noted young Dr. Roswell, occupant of another seat at the captain's table, the least bit perturbed by Grossman's shadowy hint of menace. On the contrary, her already vivid features assumed new color at the scent of danger. Her gray-green eyes brightened, a flush highlighted the natural golden beauty of her cheeks; she bent forward interestedly.

"Please, Mister Grossman . . . don't stop because of me. I want to learn everything I can about Titan. It's going to be my home from now on, you know. I'll learn sooner or later."

"Ye-e-es," acknowledged the heavy man grudgingly, "I suppose that is true. Your father is Commandant of the Space Patrol post at New Boston, isn't he? Hasn't *he* warned you of the dangers you face in coming to live with him?"

Again the girl laughed.

"Hardly! You see, he doesn't know I'm coming. He'd have conniption fits if he knew I were aboard the *Gaea*. He's a lamb, really, but terribly old-fashioned. 'Women belong on Earth,' you know that sort of thing. He thinks I'm safe in a Terra boarding-school right now. If he *dreamed* I were less than an hour off Titan—well, I'm afraid he'd be pale violet with anger."

"And," reproved Grossman sternly, "rightly so. Your father is a wise man. Titan is no place for a girl of gentle breeding. It is a vile and treacherous pest-hole. It should never have been opened to Earth colonists!"

Rockingham Roswell coughed gently. The young savant was taller than any man present, and but for the conservative cut of his clothing might have looked his true weight, but he carried himself in such a way as to seem more fragile than he really was. His lean, close-shaven cheeks were pale, and his tow-colored hair was meticulously plastered to his scalp. He wore thick-lensed, tortoiseshell glasses which he removed and polished nervously as he spoke.

"In . . . er . . . in that case, Mister Grossman, it strikes me as a bit odd that you should . . . er . . . have established business headquarters on the satellite."

Grossman glanced sharply at the slender man, snapped impatiently, "A business man cannot always pick and choose his locations, Doctor Roswell. He must follow the path of empire as it leads. Since there are Earthmen on Titan, someone must serve them. It is an obligation which cannot be refused—"

"Er . . . quite!" acknowledged Roswell confusedly. "Job of work to be done . . . noble sacrifice . . . the white man's burden . . . all that sort of rot . . . what?"

Unaccountably, Grossman flushed. "If you are trying to imply, sir," he fumed, "that I have any ulterior motive in establishing a trading post on Titan—"

"Oh, gracious, no! Nothing of the sort. I wouldn't presume to question your . . . er . . . business acumen, Factor. I'm hardly the type, what?" Roswell smiled a faint, thin, apologetic smile. "I mean I . . . er . . . I really don't know much about this sort of thing . . . if you know what I mean . . ."

Captain Burke stared at the younger man impatiently. A space-man toughened in the crucible of action, he had little patience with such learned young fops as this passenger. His words were polite, as befitted the skipper of a luxury liner, but his tone was brushed with acid.

"If you don't mind, Doctor Roswell, Factor Grossman was about to tell us something about the hazards of Titan. Well, Mister Grossman?"

Grossman took another appreciative sip of his brandy, set down the tulip-glass, and steepled his fingers.

"Well, the perils of Titan fall into several classes. Geographic, physiological and racial. In the first place, it is a satellite approximately the size of Earth's moon . . . large enough to sustain life, but small enough to be influenced by the perturbations not only of its massive primary, which lies a scant seven hundred and sixty thousand miles away, but also by the attractive forces of the Ring and Saturn's eight *other* satellites.

"Evidence of this is the peculiarity interwoven orbit trajectories of Titan and its nearest sister, Hyperion, which sometimes approach each other perilously close. Were Titan a sphere of pumaceous formation, like Luna, it would long since have burst into a million fragments under the impact of these conflicting forces. Fortunately, it is of a basaltic nature, and consequently reasonably stable.

"More immediately hazardous are what might be called the physiological dangers of Titan. These are multifold. To begin with, there is the so-called 'water' of the orb—"

"I've read about that," nodded Captain Burke gravely. "Not water at all, but—"

"But a deadly corrosive acid," finished the speaker, "yes! Happily, the 'seas' of Titan do not cover such a share of the planet's surface as do those of Earth; if they did, no life—either flora or fauna—would ever have developed upon the little world."

His heavy shoulders shivered.

"Still . . . imagine frothing, tide-swept lakes as large as Lake Erie or Victoria Nyanza splashing endlessly at shores until inch by inch and foot by foot those beaches are eroded, rotted, eaten away by the action of the fluid they contain! These are the 'oceans' of Titan. There are four of them, fed by subterranean sources we have not yet discovered. One day they will have completely devoured the parent planet, and Titan will cease to be."

"But that day, of course," interposed the girl, "is a long way off. Is this the only physiological danger?"

"There is one even *more* dreadful. The T-radiation."

"T-radiation? What is that?"

Grossman smiled mirthlessly.

"Were I able to tell you, I should be a greater physicist than any who have so far visited Titan. Dozens of the wisest have come, probed, pondered, analyzed . . . and left Titan none the wiser for their efforts. Frankly, they do not know! The very name 'T-radiation' is an admission of their failure. It is simply an abbreviation for 'Titan-radiation.' It is an electro-magnetic or radioactive emanation lethal to humans . . . that is all they know about it."

Young Dr. Roswell wiped his spectacles carefully and interrupted, "But . . . er . . . but surely, Factor, these physicists were able to determine the wave-length of the radiation? Did that not tell them—?"

Grossman said bluntly, almost rudely, "The radiation lies in the Hertizian range, Doctor Roswell. Does that knowledge help you any? Perhaps now *you* can tell us why these rays are deadly?"

Roswell flushed and faltered into silence. The girl glanced curiously at Grossman.

"Hertizian range, Factor?"

"Electrical waves ranging between 1 m. and 1/10 c.m. in length, Miss Graham. Their place is between the so-called 'short waves' of radio transmission and the infra-red or heat waves. Their existence has been known, theoretically, for at least two

hundred years. But man has never been able to find a reason, a place, or use for them. Nor have they been found to occur freely in nature elsewhere than on Titan."

"And," asked Captain Burke, "you say these waves are deadly to humans? But how, then, have our colonists managed to win and maintain a foothold—"

"I should have said," admitted Grossman, "the waves are deadly to *unshielded* humans. Lead sheathing protects the wearer from harm; consequently men in bulgers are quite safe. And one of the first acts of the Solar Space Patrolmen, upon reaching Titan, was to project a series of leaden highways or avenues between the cities of the satellite. Upon these, and *only* upon these, may Earthmen travel unprotected by bulgers. To stray from one of these roadbeds means exposure to the T-radiation. And that, in turn, means death!"

Rockingham Roswell shuddered delicately. "Beastly!" he murmured. "Deuced unpleasant sort of place, what? But, I say . . . how about the natives? How did they manage to survive before our countrymen built those jolly old lead roadways?"

Grossman pursed his lips impatiently at the affected young scholar.

"They, Doctor Roswell," he said scornfully, "are immune to the T-radiation. Certainly you are acquainted with the principles of selective breeding?"

"Selective—oh, yes! Survival of the fittest . . . all that fiddle-diddle? You mean the present Titanians *are* the present Titanians simply because they adapted their physiques to the surroundings, eh? Why, rather! That's clear enough. Still, if they can stand the radiation, I don't see why other humans—"

"Other *humans!*" Grossman laughed curtly. "My dear Doctor, it is obvious you have never seen a Titanian. Human, indeed! Why, it is the dissimilarity between the Titanians and ourselves which led me to name racial divergence as among the hazards of life on Titan.

"The creatures who rule Titan look less like humans than like those monsters deranged and alcoholic patients see in their dreams. For some reason—possibly because of this mysterious T-radiation—the denizens of the world have never bred true. Consequently, there is no way of foretelling what the child of any two parents may resemble . . . though one almost certain guess is that it will resemble neither parent.

"Bilateral symmetry is about the only constant human attribute to be found amongst the Titanians. That and a more or

less rudimentary intelligence . . . an instinct which is more akin to animal cunning than to intellect.

"Some Titanians walk erect on their hind legs. Some crawl on all fours or squirm on their bellies. Some resemble the humanoid races of our planet, or Mars, or Venus. Others look like obscene jungle beasts, ghouls, fabulous monsters.

"I have seen Titanians whose leprous flesh covered bones have no counterpart in the human skeleton . . . others with no faces at all, as we know the meaning of the word . . . others who grope blindly along on tactile tentacles, 'seeing' with foot-long tongues, 'hearing' through their fingertips.

"Some there are who look like gigantic, crimson ants; others inch their way along the streets like hideous, mangled slugs; while yet again—astonishingly—you may chance upon a Titanian not only similar in appearance to Earthmen, but as clever and quick in thought as any terrestrial."

Grossman paused, nodding significantly. "These," he said, "are the most dangerous of all."

"And—" breathed Lynn Graham—"the nature of this danger, Mister Grossman? Attack, perhaps?"

"Attack!" The trading-post factor laughed brusequely, harshly. "A mild word for it. Extermination! The Titanians hate interlopers on their world—*particularly* Earthmen—with a smoldering, implacable hatred inconceivable to a civilized mind. Had they their will, they would hunt down every Earthman and slaughter him with the most horrible tortures their warped and twisted minds can devise.

"Your father, Miss Graham—" Grossman bent forward across the table to lend emphasis to his warning—"maintains a post on Titan by sufferance only. Because the natives have not the strength nor the weapons with which to rebel. But if ever the day dawns when they find such strength or weapons—" Grossman drew a deep breath and shook his head—"Then Lord help all like us who dwell on Titan!"

II

It had arrived. It had found a birthing-place. It grew. There in the lone, lorn silence, in the thawing warmth of the nourishing sands. It spawned according to Its nature.

It made no sound save that of a thin, dry grating as Its shell-like covering stirred against the sides of the pit. But a change had come upon Its carapace. Its one-time stony surface now was mot-

tled with yolky cloud; Its one-time opaque walls were now translucent with a jelly-like shimmering. And from within the egg came the bruit of liquid movement. Slow, groping movement of Life that would be free. Amorphous hands scraped and slithered at softening, yielding walls. A single flake chipped and fell away from the gigantic shell. Another followed it. Another . . . and another.

A native of the planet, random-roaming, chanced upon the pit. His nostrils quivered with the scent of food. With greedy stealth he moved upon his prey.

And then the native witnessed the phenomenon. Wide-eyed with wonder he beheld the monstrous sight . . . the ultimate emergence of the Thing!

In his dull, brutelike brain there dawned a dreadful fear. A fear . . . and a great hope! On trembling limbs he fell back from the pit, all thoughts of food forgotten; turned and scampered to the city whence he had come.

Meanwhile, the sprawling, raw and new-fledged Thing lay gasping in the sunlight, sucking strength from the depths of the nourishing soil. It was born. It grew . . .

III

A strained silence followed Factor's final words. A silence during which Lynn Graham's troubled gaze swept the table, searching for reassurance—finding none—in the eyes of her dinner companions. A silence during which Dr. Rockingham Roswell fidgeted uneasily, removed his glasses, breathed upon them, polished them, and replaced them for the hundredth time.

It was Captain Burke who finally broke the spell. He cleared his throat and rose. "Well, I must be getting along to the bridge. We'll be at New Boston spaceport in a matter of minutes now. I suggest that you go to your staterooms, see that your luggage is in order, and prepare to disembark."

Dr. Roswell said hesitantly, "Er . . . Captain . . . just a moment. When . . . er . . . how soon does the *Gaea* return to Earth?"

"Return to Earth! But—" Captain Burke turned a blank, uncomprehending stare upon his questioner—"but you have not yet set foot on Titan!"

Dr. Roswell shuffled uncomfortably.

"I . . . er . . . I quite realize that, Captain. But I . . . er . . . have been reconsidering. In view of Mister Grossman's revelations, I . . . er . . . am not altogether certain it would be wise to pursue my investigations. . . ."

The space skipper's broad, flat features contracted into a grimace of disdain. Despite his company's instructions to maintain at all times a respectful mien toward passengers, he permitted contempt to echo in his voice.

"You don't mean to say you are afraid, Doctor Roswell!"

The young man's cheeks flushed. He said, "I . . . er . . . should not put it quite that way, sir. However, I prefer not to expose myself to needless risks. The work I had intended to do on Titan is not sufficiently important to warrant—"

Grossman chuckled. The girl, Lynn Graham, looked at the embarrassed pedant almost pityingly. Captain Burke said, "I am afraid, Doctor Roswell, it will not be possible to return to Earth immediately. The *Gaea* is not returning to Earth."

"Not returning—"

"No. We are going on to Uranus to leave a cargo of food and medical supplies there. We will, however, stop back at Titan in three Solar Constant weeks. If—" The skipper's voice was openly ironic—"if you can endure the rigors of the satellite for that length of time, we will be glad to pick you up on our return trip."

"I . . . er . . . I suppose it would not be possible for me to ride with you to Uranus?"

"I'm sorry," said Burke decidedly. "The Uranus post is a military zone forbidden to civilian tourists. I cannot take you there."

"Then in that case," shrugged Roswell, "I must stay. But you will stop for me?"

"I'll stop for you. Meanwhile, you had better make arrangements to stay somewhere where you will be quite safe." Captain Burke's patience was quite exhausted. "Miss Graham can, perhaps, prevail upon her father to allow you to remain at the Space Patrol base."

The young doctor turned to the girl eagerly.

"Can you, Miss Graham? I would be *most* grateful—"

Lynn Graham nodded, her icy politeness more devastating than forthright scorn.

"Yes, Doctor Roswell, I am reasonably sure you can make such arrangements. I will ask Daddy as soon as we land. And now, gentlemen, if you will excuse me—"

She rose and left the dining-hall. Grossman, still chuckling, followed her example. He stopped at the doorway.

"Sorry I upset you, Roswell. But cheer up! Three weeks will pass swiftly. You'll be all right on Titan if you keep your eye peeled and carry your Haemholtz at all times."

But his reassurance proved to be just the opposite. For the savant's lower jaw dropped; he quavered, "Haemholtz! Gracious

. . . you mean I should carry a ray-pistol! Oh, mercy! I couldn't *think* of doing such a thing!"

And with a little bleat of dismay, he turned and ran toward his stateroom. The two men in the dining-hall watched him disappear. Then Grossman laughed aloud, and Captain Burke snorted.

"The younger generation! If that's the kind of men Earth is breeding nowadays, Lord help us all!"

Dr. Rockingham Roswell pattered down the long, metal corridors of the *Gaea* to his A-deck suite. He fumbled near-sightedly at the vibrolock and stumbled into his compartment. But once inside, the door securely bolted behind him, a change came over him. A change which would have astonished those who had a few moments before been amused at his timidity.

He removed his spectacles, casing them and thrusting them into an inside pocket. He then removed his coat. Oddly enough, rid of that closely-tailored garment, his shoulders looked considerably broader, his chest inches deeper. He drew a deep breath . . . much the same sort of breath as a sponge diver draws when he emerges from the hampering depths of the sea to the more accustomed world above and called a name.

"Bud?"

A figure appeared from the plushy wallows of a divan, waved at the young professor companionably.

"Hi, Rocky! Beginnin' to wonder when you was comin' back. We're halfway to the cradle. What's the good word?"

"The good word," grinned his informant, "is that I've paved the way. Miss Graham is going to ask her father to let us stay at the Patrol base."

"Huh?" Mulligan looked baffled. "What's good about *that*? We could've stayed at the Patrol Base anyway. All you had to do was tell Colonel Graham who you were—"

His superior officer groaned in mock despair.

"Sometimes I wonder if that cranium of yours is good for anything but a hair-garden! Don't you see, Bud, that the whole scheme depends on our being *invited* to become guests at the Patrol base? Of course, we could present our credentials, walk directly from the *Gaea* to headquarters. But it would be a cold tip-off to Grossman that we are S.I.D. men.

"As it is, he hasn't got the faintest idea that 'Doctor Rockingham Roswell' and his 'valet' are members of the Solar Investigation Department. He thinks I'm a very badly rattled pedagogue, and you're a mealy-mouthed nonentity. And that is exactly what we want him to believe—until we get the goods on him."

"Then he *is* our man?"

"I'm practically certain of it now. He's as nervous as a cat. Flared up the moment I questioned his reasons for living on Titan. As Factor of the New Boston trading-post he is in an ideal situation to stir up trouble amongst the Titanians. And that's precisely what he has been doing. We don't know exactly why—yet!—but it's quite clear that for some reason of his own he wants all Earthmen save himself to leave Titan."

"Gold, maybe?" suggested Bud. "Oil? *Ekalastron*?"

"No-o-o, I don't think so. The mineralogists would have detected the presence of any of those when they surveyed Titan. His reason is something deeper than that—Say! Wait a minute! I wonder if it possibly—?"

"Yeah?"

"No, I'm crazy! It couldn't be that. I happened to think of that T-radiation. But I don't believe even Grossman is enough of a scientist to have discovered what it is or how it can be used—if at all. Well, anyhow—"

"Anyhow, we're in at the Base. And Grossman doesn't suspect us. That's part of the job. So—the next move?"

"We circulate. We move around and ask questions and snoop and pry and investigate."

Mulligan grinned.

"In the good old Rocky Russell tradition, eh?"

"Who?"

"Rocky Russell, I said. Don't tell me you've forgot your real name, chum?"

Rocky Russell reached into an inside pocket, brought forth a pair of thick-lensed spectacles, hooked them over his ears. His voice lifted to a high, gentle, hesitant whine.

"Oh, mercy me!" he simpered. "Forgotten my . . . er . . . real name? But, of course not! I am Doctor Rockingham Roswell. And you are my valet, Ambrose."

Bud groaned.

"Gawd! All the names in creation, and I've got to be called 'Ambrose'!"

"So you're a doctor?" asked Colonel Graham. "That's fine. We can use another doctor on this post. Glad to have you stay with us, Doctor Roswell."

Several hours had passed since the *Gaea*'s landing on Titan. In that time, much had happened. Dr. Roswell and his "man" had made their *adieux* to a scornful Captain Burke and a highly

amused Factor Grossman, removed their baggage from the cruiser, and accompanied Lynn Graham to the S.S.P. base a few miles outside the Titanian city of New Boston.

There they had witnessed the surprise meeting of the Commandant and his daughter. Lynn Graham had rightly guessed her father's reaction upon seeing her. She had erred in only one minor detail. She had expected him to turn "pale violet" with anger. The color he actually achieved was somewhere in the apoplectic spectrum between dull scarlet and turkey red.

His outraged bellows, replete with invocations to the deities of a dozen worlds and highly censorable, were audible for a good half mile. But eventually—when Lynn had pointed out that: (1) she could not return to the *Gaea*; (2) she didn't want to return to the *Gaea*, and (3) that she had no intention of returning to the *Gaea* even if she could—he calmed down a trifle. And in his brusque kiss of greeting was an affection hardly in keeping with the violence of his protestations.

It was then that Lynn had introduced Dr. Roswell and his valet; explaining their desire to stay at the base. Confused and bewildered, the commandant had agreed. And now the quartet were gathered in the colonel's private quarters. The colonel, in his own crisp way, was trying to be friendly.

"A doctor," he repeated. "That's good. We need the services of a good doctor around here."

Rocky smiled feebly.

"I . . . er . . . I'm afraid you don't understand, sir. I'm not an M.D., you know. I'm an . . . er . . . D.M."

"D.M.?" repeated Graham wonderingly. "What's that?"

"A Doctor," explained Rocky, "of Mythology. It's an archeological degree, rather than a medical one. I'm what . . . er . . . might be called a research student. I gather folk tales and ancient legends, study them, analyze them, and attempt to determine their underlying meanings." He beamed happily from behind his thick-lensed glasses. "A most fascinating hobby," he said. "Oh, goodness, yes . . . most fascinating!"

Colonel Graham stared at him incredulously.

"Legends! Folk tales! But why on earth—?"

Red of face, he spluttered into silence. Lynn tried to bridge the awkward moment.

"What Daddy means, Doctor Roswell, is—why do you hunt down these ancient fables? Does your work have any practical value?"

Rocky's eyebrows arched as if the query caused him a physical pain.

"Practical value! My dear young lady, of course not! It is purely a labor of love. Knowledge for the sake of pure knowledge. Er . . . *scientia gratia scientiarum*, you know . . . that sort of thing. Of course—" He shrugged—"once in a while the research of my learned colleagues does contribute a share to the understanding of man's more mundane pursuits, but such occasions are, I hasten to assure you, quite incidental—"

Colonel Graham had recovered his composure.

"Mythology, eh? Well, what sort of legends interest you, Doctor? Fairy tales? Ghost stories?"

"Well—no," said Rocky pedantically. "The tales of greatest interest are those of fabulous monsters . . . incredible beings endowed with fantastic powers or attributes. Such may be found in the mythologies of any race or clan. Not only on Earth, but on all the planets have we heard such stories. It is our delight to track down these tales and unearth the germ of underlying truth which created them."

"You mean," queried the girl, "that behind each folk tale lies a true cause or event or—or creature?"

"Exactly. For instance—well, let me see—you are familiar with the Earthly legend of the phoenix, aren't you?"

"The bird which was supposed to have had a life-span of a thousand years, at the end of which time it threw itself into a blazing pyre, from the ashes of which it was reborn?"

"That," nodded Dr. Rocky, "is the legend. Quoted as you have told it, it made no sense to Earthmen for thousands of years. Until, in fact, the year 1987 A.D., when the first Martian expedition visited the desert planet. The members of this expedition were amazed to discover a *rara avis* upon Mars impervious to extremes of both heat and cold. A bird with an astonishing life-span in excess of a thousand Earthly years. In short . . . the archetype of the fabled phoenix!"

Colonel Graham looked interested in spite of himself.

"By Gad, that's right! The *tulalaroo* bird. Doesn't mind heat or cold, either one. Nests in ice or red-hot coals! That's rather interesting, Doctor. Any more such examples?"

"Scores! There is the fabled unicorn . . . a one-horned gazelle-like animal certainly not indigenous to Terra, yet it found its place in the 'unnatural natural history' of not one but a dozen races. Whence originated this record of a single horned creature we could not guess until we discovered such a beast on Venus.

"The fabulous 'salamander' turned out to be a common asbestos-like lizard of Mercury. Aqueous Venus solved for us the

problems of the mermaid, the sea serpent and the undine. On mighty Jupiter mythologists encountered the fire-breathing saurian which gave rise to the 'dragon' myth—"

"But, Doctor Roswell!" gasped the girl, "what does this mean? That once upon a time, countless centuries ago, beasts of this sort roamed Earth? Or—?"

Rocky shook his head soberly.

"We do not know, Miss Graham. There are a number of equally valid possibilities. One is that which you have mentioned . . . that Earth was once host to all the types of animal life now to be found on its sister planets. Another is that aeons ago Earthmen—or the intellectual rulers of one of the other planets—knew the secret of spacetravel. The factual records of places visited, strange sights seen, would in the musty passage of time become mythology.

"Still another possibility—"

"Yes?"

"Well, it is . . . er . . . a theory recently advanced by an erudite scholar, but it has elements of fantasy which make it almost incredible. You are . . . er . . . familiar with the theories of Svante Arrhenius?"

Lynn frowned. "I remember the name faintly. Didn't he claim life traveled through the ether?"

"Yes. He put forward the concept that the life-germ is universally diffused, constantly emitted from all habitable worlds in the form of spores which traverse space for years or ages, the majority being ultimately destroyed by the flame of some blazing star, but some few finding a resting-place on bodies which have reached the habitable stage.

"My colleague has carried this theory a step forward, suggesting it is not only the fundamental life-germ which thus travels . . . but also individual and distinctive life-forms! He has suggested that from each and every world in every galaxy, occasionally there set forth into the void the spores or eggs of every highly developed life-form.

"Most of these never reach their destinations. Some do. And when these do, unwilling worlds play host to beasts of nightmare mien.

IV

A babble from the street lifted Humboldt Grossman's eyes from shrewd perusal of his ledgers. He frowned, rose to investi-

gate the tumult, then stood stock-still in his tracks, startled as the door of his private chamber burst open.

A stunted troll with four, gnarled, dangling arms—a native Titanian—served as spokesman for the excited group.

“A marvel, Master!” he jabbered. “Behold, a marvel! It was found by one of us in the sand-pits north of the city, captured and brought to you immediately. See, O Master, its height, its bulk, its strength.”

He stood aside and into the room a score of tugging natives hauled a bound and helpless creature.

Bound and helpless creature?

Bound . . . yes. With yards upon yards of tightly laced metal cord which even now stretched taut over bulging sinews. Helpless . . . perhaps. It stood quietly, struggling not, but in its very quiescence Factor Grossman found a swift, disturbing menace. It was still as flood-waters are still, ere, angered, they burst with fury the puny dams constraining them. It was motionless as powerful machines are motionless before, spurred to deed, they ravage all before them.

A creature it was. But such a creature. Humanoid in form . . . male . . . but dull of eye as a brain-fogged idiot. It was seven feet tall and half as broad of shoulder, heavy of thigh and iron-strong of bicep. A Hercules, an Atlas of a man.

Grossman stared at it strangely. Then he turned to his native visitors.

“It is a marvel, yes. A great man. But what has it to do with me?”

The spokesman cringed forward hopefully.

“It has power, O Master. You promised us vengeance and freedom when we found you one with strength to fight our cause.”

Grossman’s thick face mottled with disdain. “Fool!” he spat. “Do you call this creature power enough to wage a war? One half wit giant against a well-armed garrison of humans? Take it away. This is not the power I asked for!”

The Titanian inched another step forward. “Wait, O Master!” he advised. “Wait and see what we have seen! For not yet do you understand. He is still growing!”

Grossman stared, his tiny, pig-like eyes bewildered.

“Growing? This giant—growing?”

“Yes, Master. He is as yet a babe! This monster is less than two hours old. . . .”

V

The gunner said, "This yere now four-headed animule jest sorta wriggled its fur, like, an' presto! all of a sudden it ain't no beast a-tall, but a bird! Yessirree, jest as sure as I'm tellin' the gospel truth, it turned smack into a purple bird with six green wings an' a lavender tail—"

He stopped and aimed an accurate stream of Venusian *mekel*-juice at a hapless insect. The insect floundered helplessly. So did Rocky Russell—inwardly—with his desire to laugh out loud. But he restrained himself, nodding his head sagely as he jotted a transcript of the old trooper's narrative in his little black notebook.

At his side, Lynn Graham protested, "Oh, Gunner, but *really*! I mean you must be mistaken! Animals simply don't turn into birds and fly away—"

"This un did!" swore Gunner solemnly. "Hope to drop dead in my—I mean, cross my heart! An' that ain't all the curious sights I seen in my life, neither. If the Puffessor would like to hear another little story—"

"I'm sure," said Rocky primly, "it would be most interesting. But I hate to trouble you—"

"No trouble, Puffessor. No trouble a-tall. 'Course my throat is gettin' a mite dry-like from talkin' so much. I might could use a sip o' water . . . or mebbe a drap o' likker to sorta loosen my tongue—"

Rocky dug deep, and a coin passed between him and his informant. "Please allow me, Gunner. And many thanks. We'll have another little chat soon. I'm afraid I must be running along now, though."

Followed by his two companions, he climbed from the pill-box embrasure in which he had been interviewing the not-too-reliable old Patrolman.

Two days had passed since "Dr. Roswell" and his aide had taken up residence in the Base. In that time, Rocky had wandered much, talked much, and learned much. Slowly he was beginning to gather that accumulation of facts which, he hoped and believed, would ultimately bring the weight of the Law to bear on Factor Humboldt Grossman.

Exactly what Grossman's racket was, he still didn't know. But from various and sundry sources he had heard tales of the fat man's greed and cunning, his autocratic domination over a number of the lower-class Titanians. In his own small way, and to

those rebels he had gathered about him, Humboldt Grossman was emperor of New Boston. It remained to be proven whether or not he could extend his control to embrace the whole of the satellite.

Emerging from the sunken gunnery pit, the trio found themselves upon one of the metal highways which criss-crossed the little world.

To their left lay the squat, grim rows of structures which comprised Fort Beausejour, the Solar Space Patrol base on Titan. Barracks, administration and ordnance headquarters, mess halls, dumps and depots mingled in gray heterogeneity behind a strong defense-in-depth calculated to withstand months of siege or any known form of military attack.

To their right, several miles distant at the far end of the highway, lay the city of New Boston. It was a strange city, a curious commingling of ancient and modern, savage and cultured, alien and civilized. It boasted two tremendous skyscrapers of ultramodern design constructed by Earth colonists, but about and around these, clustered like mud-daubers' nests, clung rows upon rows, thousands upon countless thousands, of tiny, dingy, one-story hovels . . . the dwellings of the natives.

It was into this city Rocky Russell's investigations now led him. He glanced at his wrist chronometer.

"Bless my soul! Very nearly time for my appointment with Factor Grossman. You are sure we can use a roller, Miss Graham?"

"Positive," answered the girl cheerfully. "I asked Daddy yesterday. You wait here; I'll get it and come back."

She moved away, giving the two S.I.D. men their first moment of privacy in hours. Bud Mulligan sighed and fumbled for a cigarette.

"So we're really gonna get to see Grossman at last? Good! How'd he sound when you audioed him for an interview?"

"Friendly enough," answered Rocky. "He said he was very busy, but he'd be glad to give me a few minutes."

"Did he know what you wanted?"

Rocky grinned a slow, lopsided grin. "Everybody on Titan knows by now," he drawled, "that there's a myth-chasing crackpot roaming loose. I'm Public Joke Number One. Which suits me just fine."

"Yeah," snorted Bud disgustedly, "but when this job's done, I'm gonna backtrack and do a little plain and fancy nose-punch-in! Like that old spacerat we talked to a few minutes ago—did you ever hear such lyin' in your life? A bird with purple wings an'—"

"Cheer up!" chuckled Rocky. "Gunner thought he was giving me the runaround, and for a generally unimaginative old codger he didn't do such a bad job of yarn spinning. He'd be surprised to learn, though, that his wild story is not half so fantastic as some of the honest tales I've heard since I began this masquerade."

Bud nodded grudgingly.

"That's true enough. An', boy, I really got to hand it to you. You talk that Doctor-o'-Mythology patter like you really *was* one. Sometimes you sound like you really believed in it yourself!"

"And the funny part of it is," said Rocky, "I almost *do*! As for talking the patter . . . well, no wonder! I studied comparative mythologies for three solid months under the best experts in the field before I undertook this job, Bud. I know more about hamadryads and demigods and winged horses than old man Bulfinch himself! Well—" He nodded significantly, and his voice lifted to the high-pitched tones of "Dr. Rockingham Roswell"—"here comes Lynn. Off we go!"

Bud shot a swift, appraising glance at him. "Oh-ho! So it's 'Lynn', now, eh?"

Fortunately, Rocky Russell did not have time to concoct an alibi for that slip of the tongue. Because the roller was drawing up beside them, Lynn was motioning them in. And in a few minutes they were on their way to New Boston.

"You understand," said Factor Grossman, "I have never *seen* this creature myself, Dr. Roswell. I am merely repeating the description given me by some of my friends."

Rocky nodded, busily jotting in his ubiquitous black notebook the facts just told him by the fat man. "A furry animal," he repeated, "with the netherparts of a horse and the torso of a human. Two curly black horns . . . cloven hoofs . . . is occasionally glimpsed in damp, woodland dells . . . excellent!"

He looked up, smiling. "Very interesting, sir. You have perhaps already noted the similarity between this . . . er . . . thing and the 'Centaur' of Greek mythology? Amazing, isn't it, that we should find the same . . . er . . . legendary monster on two worlds separated by so many millions of miles? Well, we must organize an expedition to search for this creature. Now, have you any other fables to add to my little collection?"

He poised his pencil expectantly, his eyes vaguely eager and excited.

"We-e-ell, let me see—" Grossman stroked, a sleek, fleshy jaw—"I heard one the other day about—Yes? What is it, Grushl?"

A Titanian had pressed open the door of the Factor's private office. He glanced at the guests nervously.

"If you please, sir—the Thing-that-Grows! It has broken its—"

"*That will do!*" Grossman's voice crackled like the snap of a bulldozer's whip. He rose hastily, bowed apology to his visitors. "If you will excuse me a moment—"

He strode to the door, propelled his underling out of sight and hearing. The three guests stared after him in astonishment.

"Well!" exclaimed Lynn Graham. "Whatever came over him so quickly? Why, he turned positively pale!"

"You're telling me?" grunted Bud. "He looked like he seen his grandmother's ghost . . . or his own. What did that guy say? 'Thing-that-Grows'? What would *that* be? And what would it break?"

"Shhh!" warned Rocky. "He's coming back . . . Ah, there Factor! Everything all right?"

Grossman had been gone but a few seconds, but in that time a change had come over him. His eyes were dark with . . . Rocky could not tell just what. Excitement? Or fear? A thin film of perspiration overspread his cheeks, his forehead, his upper lip. He tried to put reassurance into his voice, but the effort didn't quite jell.

"Quite all right, Doctor. A little trouble with . . . with a small horticultural experiment we are conducting. But I'm afraid I must ask you to leave now. I have work to do."

Rocky said, "If I . . . er . . . can be of any help—?"

"No. Thank you very much, but this is work of an . . . er . . . experimental nature. Company business, you know." The Factor bustled them to the door. "We will meet again. Good afternoon."

And almost before they had stammered their confused farewells, he had waved to them and lumbered off.

"Well!" said Lynn. "I must say that's the quickest brush-off I ever got . . . if not the smoothest."

"Horticultural experiment," mused Rocky. "Mmm-hmmm! It's possible, of course, but . . . I wonder. Bud . . . er . . . I mean, Ambrose—"

"Yeah?" said Ambrose.

"I think I'll stay here in New Boston for a few more hours. I'd like to . . . er . . . study the native quarters. Perhaps you would be kind enough to escort Miss Graham back to the Fort?"

"Certainly," nodded Bud. "A pleasure. But—"

Lynn Graham had been staring from one to the other of the

two men querulously. Now she declared herself. "Oh, no!" she stated flatly. "You don't get rid of *me* so easily as all that. Doctor Roswell—just what's going on here?"

Rocky fumbled for his glasses.

"Er . . . going on, Miss Graham? I don't understand—"

"Neither do I—which is just why I'm asking. First Grossman goes into a mild panic; now you two are acting like the masked strangers in Act Two. Not to mention the fact—" the girl pointed out shrewdly—"that for a few minutes you quite forgot to talk like a college professor . . . and addressed your alleged 'valet' as 'Bud'—"

Rocky did remove his glasses. But this time he did not breathe on them, wipe them, and replace them as was the habit of "Dr. Roswell." Instead, he shoved them out of sight, and grinned at the girl. When he spoke it was in his natural voice.

"All right, Miss Lynn," he said, "you win. I pulled a boner. Now I might as well come clean. I am not Doctor Rockingham Roswell at all. My name is Russell . . . Rocky Russell . . . and I'm here on Titan to—"

But not at that moment did he tell Lynn Graham who he was, and his purpose on the satellite. For suddenly he paused in mid-sentence, his jaw dropping open, and his eyes widening to match.

"Lord!" he gasped. "Look . . . look at *that!*"

The others, too, had turned to determine the origin of the rumbling sound. Now they saw it. A tremendous motor-roller trundling down the main thoroughfare of New Boston. A heavy roller bearing a ponderous burden . . . a single, gigantic item. The appearance and purpose of this item was unmistakable, but its size . . .

"Manacles!" croaked Bud. "But . . . but who ever heard of manacles that size! *That Thing is twenty feet in circumference!*"

VI

Humboldt Grossman entered the cavern cautiously. It was dark in there, but not altogether dark. The ever-present luminescence of the chamber walls lent an eerie glow by which could be seen the giant figure huddled at the far end. There had been bonds upon the wrists and ankles of this figure, but now the frayed ends of snapped hawsers dangled loosely as the creature pawed fretfully at adamant walls and ceiling.

At sight of the monster, Grossman faltered, stunned. To the Titanian behind him he choked hoarsely, "He—he still grows!"

"Yes, Master. Already he must crouch to avoid being crushed by the cavern's roof. Each hour he grows faster. In a day . . . half a day . . . perhaps less . . . he will die in here if we do not let him out."

Grossman smiled. It was not a pleasant smile.

"Have no fear. Before that time, he will be outside—under my control!" He stepped forward into the cave. The creature's eyes turned questioningly toward this tiny mote of life which dared approach him, and thus stretched forth a hand to crush the annoying insect. But from a curiously-shapen tube in the insect's claw leaped a lancet of flame. A gout of red agony that scorched and blistered his palm. The giant howled and pulled his hand away. Grossman smiled. Good! Who holds an adversary in fear of pain possesses a slave. Now, if only the creature were telepathic—"You!" he thought, his thought directed and intensified by the menavisal unit in his helmet, "have you intelligence? Can you understand me?"

The giant's answer came back sluggishly.

"I can . . . understand."

"That is well. Then listen to me, and mark well my words. I am Master here. Do you acknowledge that?"

The creature stirred restlessly. "Master? I accept no Master. I am Master of mine own will."

Grossman pressed the grip of his Haemholtz. A flash of livid lightning seared the subterranean chamber. Grossman challenged, "You defy the Master of the fire-that-bites?"

The giant cringed against the farthest wall. "Nay!" he conceded. "You are Master. I am your servant."

"It is well you understand. For there is work to be done. When it is accomplished, then you will be freed. Hear now, huge one, what is expected of you . . ."

VII

"Manacles!" repeated Rocky Russell, "Manacles twenty feet in circumference! But that—that's impossible! Handcuffs for a normal six-foot man measure about six *inches* in circumference. Twenty foot manacles would be used on someone *two hundred and forty feet tall!*"

"Always assuming of course," Lynn pointed out, "that these gyves are to be used on a man. Which isn't very likely. Much more possible that they were constructed for some beast . . . some tremendous animal—"

"True," admitted Rocky. "But even so—imagine the size of that animal! Well, that settles it. Bud, I want you to take Miss Graham back to the fort immediately."

"And you?"

"I'm going to follow that roller."

"But there may be danger—"

"There undoubtedly *is* danger," replied Rocky grimly, "directed at the Patrol . . . perhaps the whole of Titan. Those manacles are somehow associated with Grossman's secret. I've got to learn how. You can help best by racing back to Beausejour and warning Colonel Graham to be on guard against any eventuality. Keep your portable vocoder tuned to our private wavelength. If and when I learn anything important I'll send it on to you. O.Q.?"

Bud shrugged helplessly.

"You're the boss. But I'd rather stay here with you and—"

"Get going! Oh—when you reach the Base, take off the lid. Tell Colonel Graham who we are."

"And if it's not too much trouble," interrupted Lynn Graham, "would you mind telling me *now*?"

Rocky grinned at her, for the last time using Dr. Roswell's high whine, "Oh, mercy, Miss Graham, you mustn't be impatient. Ambrose will tell you as you ride."

"*Ambrose!*" fumed Bud. "Ambrose be damned—!" But he was talking to empty space. Rocky had already disappeared down the avenue after the gyve-laden roller.

Fortunately the roller, groaning under its ponderous burden, was not moving very fast. Rocky, though on foot, was able to keep it within sight without too obviously appearing to be following it. In the character of Dr. Rockingham Roswell, already known and amusing to the Titanians, he dawdled through the city five hundred yards or so in the wake of the burdened vehicle.

Through business streets he followed it, where eyes turned to follow its passage and furtive Titanians whispered to each other behind concealing palms, and—as the squalid little shops thinned out—into the suburban residential districts . . . finally quite out of the city proper.

Out here it was practically impossible to follow the truck without being noticed. Once the city's artificial foliage was left behind, the landscape of Titan's countryside stretched stark and severe so far as the eye could see . . . its drab, sandy monotony broken only by an occasional dune, its dull sameness embellished only by the silvery span of roadbed upon which humans must travel to live on Titan.

By dropping far behind the roller, Rocky was able to keep it in sight for a little while longer. But then his efforts came suddenly to naught as the driver of the truck—a Titanian—swerved completely off the lead highway and began rolling across the barren desert toward a hummock outlined on the horizon some miles distant.

Lacking a bulger, Rocky was stopped cold. No way to follow, now. But he waited and watched a while longer to assure himself that the swollen rise of ground *was* the roller's destination, then strolled back into New Boston.

Here he sought the privacy of a 'fresher, and called Bud on the vocoder. Mulligan answered immediately.

"Yeah, Rocky? Everything all right?"

"Everything's all *wrong*! The confounded roller left the highway and plowed across the gray-and-nasty. Having no desire to be cooked into frizzled beef, I gave up the chase."

"That's tough, Chief. What do we do now?"

"I," said Rocky, "stay right here. You load a couple of bulgers in a roller and come charging back here as fast as you can. I still want to find out what Grossman's hiding in those hills that needs to be tied up with twenty-foot bands of forged steel."

"O.Q." said Bud. "Sit tight. I'll pick you up in three shakes."

"Make it two!"

"One," chuckled Bud. "I'm practically on my way now."

He was as good as his word. Rocky had only finished one cigarette when a blue S.S.P. roller came tearing up the highway from Fort Beausejour. Bud jumped out, bulger-clad and carrying a second protective suit for his comrade.

"Here you are, pal. Where do we go from here?"

"Out of town on the east highway. I'll show you. A hill rising out of—Hey, wait a minute! Who's driving this crate?"

Bud looked embarrassed.

"Oh—she is!"

"She?"

"Miss Graham. She—"

"—refused," chimed in Lynn Graham, "to be left out of it. Indeed I did. Captain Russell, you ought to be ashamed of yourself, deceiving us the way you did. When the Sergeant, here, told me who you *really* were, and what you were doing here, I almost *died* with excitement. And to think that you, a Captain in the S.I.D., pretended to be a mythologist! It's the funniest thing—"

"Miss Graham," interrupted Rocky impatiently, "there is nothing at all amusing about the job we are engaged in. It is,

moreover, no work in which a girl should be involved. You would oblige me by returning to the Fort on the first transport bus—”

“Oh, no! This is a Patrol roller, and I requisitioned it in my own name. Either I drive it or—” Stubbornly—“or it doesn’t roll!”

“Very well, then. You may take us as far as the desert path. But there we leave you. And now, let’s get going. We have wasted enough time as it is.”

Rocky motioned Bud into the roller. A few seconds later they were speeding noiselessly out on the highway toward the spot where Rocky had seen the truck leave the road.

Russell had been keeping an eye on his chronometer for the past little while, estimating the number of daylight minutes left to him. On this little satellite there was no such thing as dusk or twilight. At ninety million miles from Sol, there was little enough sunlight. Titan’s main radiance came not from the Sun, but from its own parent planet which, a huge, shining platter in the sky, gathered up and reflected to its tiny satellite the thin illumination from afar . . . for all the world like a gigantic, reflecting mirror.

Titan revolved on its axis in fifteen hours, twenty-three minutes. Almost the whole of its day period had elapsed now. Shortly . . .

Yes, even as he studied out the problem, night came suddenly and completely to this part of Titan. It descended instantaneously, snuffing out the light as a finger presses the wick of a candle. Only the stars remained, glowing white in the rich, jet vastness of outer space.

The girl reached toward the dashboard instinctively, but Rocky’s hand clasped about her wrist.

“No! Don’t!”

“But—but I was only going to turn on the lights.”

“I know. But you mustn’t. We’re getting very close to the spot now. Can you see to drive without them?”

“Why, I—I guess so,” said Lynn dubiously. She was surprised, herself, to learn that she could. “Why, yes! The road stands out like a dark ribbon against the sands on either side. Isn’t that strange?”

“Not so strange at that,” grunted Rocky. “I’m beginning to get an idea about the mysterious T-radiation of this planet. I may be completely wrong, of course, but so far my theory fits all the facts I’ve observed. There’s something I would like to know, though. Grossman told us the soil killed humans. I wonder *how* they die?”

“I can answer that. Daddy told me the first day I was here. He

was warning me against ever leaving the shielded areas . . . the Fort, the city, the roads. He said that if they wander onto the soil of Titan without protection, humans just shrivel up and crumble into dust like—like mummies!”

“Like mummies, eh!” grunted Rocky. He sounded quite well satisfied. “Mmmhmm! Then *that* fits, too. Yes, I think I’m beginning to understand a lot of things . . . including the reason Factor Grossman would like to rid this little world of all competitors—”

“Well, don’t keep secrets!” snapped Bud. “We’d like to know, too. What’s it all about?”

“No time now. There’s the hill out yonder. Pull up here, Miss Lynn. Here’s where we leave you.”

Lynn stopped the roller obediently. But as Bud and Rocky climbed out she asked, “What do you want me to do now? Can’t I come with you?”

“No. You turn the roller around and wait here. We have no idea what we’re going to buck up against. We may have to retreat—suddenly. If so, I’ll fire three blasts on my Haemholtz. Two short, one long. If you see that signal, get ready to start moving. We’ll come on the double-quick. But if we’re being pursued too closely to make it—”

“Yes?”

“Then don’t wait for us!” ordered Rocky. “Head for the Base and bring the Patrolmen. Understand?”

“All but one thing,” complained the girl. “Why not send for a platoon of Patrolmen right now? Why wait until it is too late?”

“Because,” explained Rocky patiently, “despite our suspicions, we have as yet no actual *proof* that the Factor is involved in anything shady. The Patrol is an organization sworn to maintain the Law, not to violate it, riding roughshod over the rights and privileges of citizens.

“When we are certain—as I fully expect we shall be shortly—that Grossman is implicated in some illegal scheme then we can call in the Patrol. But until that time—”

“Until that time,” broke in an oily, taunting voice, you will play the part of quixotic fools, eh, my dear Doctor? But has it never occurred to you that by the time you get the proof you want . . . it may be too late to summon help?”

Rocky whirled, as did his two companions. From the side of the road, where they had lain in dark concealment behind a low escarpment, rose a circle of shadowy figures. The largest of these, a heavy man looming even greater in his protective bulger, approached them. In his left hand he held a flash; its rays glinted

upon still another instrument in his right hand . . . the tube of a Haemholtz burner held steadily upon them. All recognized the newcomer's voice at once.

"Grossman!"

VIII

In the gloom, Grossman's features could be seen behind the quartzite viewpane of his bulger, but by the thick satisfaction in his voice, Rocky could guess the complacent smirk lingering on his over-red lips.

"Yes, my friends," he acknowledged, "Grossman. This is somewhat of a reversal, no? The one you came to apprehend has captured you. My dear Doctor Roswell, did you consider me a perfect fool? Did you not know the driver of my roller would report to me that you had followed him to this spot?"

Rocky said levelly, "Not 'Doctor Roswell,' Grossman. My name is Russell. Captain Russell of the S.I.D.—And it is my duty to advise you that you stand self-convicted of armed assault upon the persons of legal officers engaged in the performance of their duties. Anything you say may later be used against you."

Grossman laughed.

"My soul, Captain, you *are* a cool one! Not the same man at all as the learned doctor who was afraid of firearms! It is too bad you have blundered into this situation. I rather admire your effrontery. We could have been friends, I think."

"The question," said Rocky dryly, "is open to argument."

Lynn Graham bridled, "This is all very high-handed, Mister Grossman, and very mysterious. What is all this talk of 'capturing' someone? What do you intend to do with us?"

Grossman said soothingly, "Have no fear, Miss Graham, you will come to no harm. But I fear that for the present I shall be compelled to take you into—well, shall we call it, 'protective custody'? You see, I have—ah—*certain plans*. It would not do for these plans to be overthrown at the final moment. Therefore, I must request you to be my guests until I have succeeded in gaining my objective—"

"Which is," interrupted Rocky harshly, "complete control of Titan?"

"Exactly, Captain Russell."

"And its wealth."

"And its—" Grossman stopped abruptly, the tone of his voice altering. "Ah! Then you know?"

"Enough," said Russell. "Enough to warn you, Grossman, that it won't work. This isn't the first time, you know, that an individual has tried to discard interplanetary law and seize control of some rich plum. The penal colonies are full of ambitious men like yourself who thought they could defy the Space Patrol. But it won't work, Grossman. No man, or group of men, wields sufficient power to defeat the forces of justice and order—"

Grossman chuckled again, this time delightedly. "You know a little, Captain—yes. But not enough! Titan will be mine—and soon!—because I have found an ally powerful enough to win me my demands. You doubt? Very well, you shall see for yourself. Come!"

He spun to his little coterie of followers, snapped commands in the strange, guttural tongue of Titan. The oddly assorted creatures, some humanoid in form, some frighteningly animalistic, formed a rough guard about Rocky and Bud. Grossman hesitated before Lynn.

"You have no protective suit? That is unfortunate. It would, of course, be fatal for you to accompany us across the sands without one. Yet I cannot permit you to go free—Grushl!"

"Yes, Master?"

"Take the girl to my office building in the city and keep her there until I come. She must not escape, nor may she communicate with any other humans. You understand?"

"Yes, Master."

"Very well. Take her away. And now, gentlemen, if you are quite ready—Forward, march!"

The Titanians behind Bud and Rocky prodded. Helpless in the face of vastly superior odds, the two S.I.D. men stumbled forward off the highway and across the rough desert, toward the hill dully gleaming a short distance away.

Seated at the controls of the tiny roller, Lynn Graham was thinking furiously as she drove. Obviously there was no chance of escaping so long as that flabby-fleshed parody of manhood crouched behind her with a Haemholtz leveled on the small of her back. Yet somehow she must get away . . . get to the Fort and bring the Patrol . . .

Guile, that was her only chance. Take advantage of the slow-thinking Titanian's inferior mentality. She turned and smiled back over her shoulder.

"Have you ever been to the Patrol Base before?" she asked pleasantly.

Grushl answered mechanically, "Yes. Many times—" Then the implication of her words penetrated his brute brain. "Before? But we are not going to the Patrol Base."

"Maybe," retorted Lynn airily, "you're not, but I am. Just as fast as this roller will carry me."

Grushl's heavy brows gathered in perplexity.

"But, no! You are to drive to the office building, there await the Master."

Lynn laughed. "What nonsense! So long as I am the driver of this roller, I will take it where I wish."

"Then," said Grushl thoughtfully, "I will be forced to shoot you. You must not escape."

"But you can't do that—" Lynn pointed out shrewdly. "Factor Grossman said nothing about shooting me. He ordered that I was to be kept safely until he came."

"Yes," pondered the Titanian, "that is true. But I see no other way to—"

"I am afraid you will have to let me drive to Fort Beausejour. So long as I am driving, there is nothing you can do to prevent me taking the roller where I wish."

Grushl, who had been wrestling laboriously with the problem, now suddenly saw the light. His deepset eyes brightened. "Oh, no! There is another way!" he cried triumphantly. "I will drive the roller!"

"B-but—" cried Lynn.

"That is the solution. Stop the roller. You and I will change places. I will drive; you will move back here."

Obediently, Lynn drew the car to a halt, slipped from the driver's cubicle as the Titanian moved from the rear seat to take her place. Grushl smiled at her complacently. "You see?" he boasted. "It is really very simple. Now I can stop the roller wherever I wish. The Master will be obeyed." He reached for the controls laying his Haemholtz on the cushion beside him as he did so. That was what Lynn had been waiting for. In one sudden motion she leaned forward, scooped up the weapon.

"Sorry, Grushl!" she cried. "But it's you or me—"

She slashed the tube down hard upon the Titanian's scalp. Grushl groaned once, heavily—and sagged. His hands, falling away, dragged at the steering control-stick. In an instant the car jerked into convulsive motion, charged toward the edge of the road.

Lynn screamed and tugged at the door beside her. In a moment more she would have been carried out across the deadly sands

without a shield of any sort. But just as the roller left the road, the girl threw herself through the door . . . fell sprawling on the edge of the roadbed.

The roller bounced out fifty . . . a hundred . . . two hundred yards into the desertland . . . then stalled. It lay there, a dark form dimly outlined against the thin iridescence of the soil, a silent vehicle bearing a single, unconscious occupant.

Lynn Graham stared at it dolefully for a few moments. Then, because there was no use crying over spilt milk—or lost means of transportation—she turned and hurried toward the city as quickly as possible afoot.

As they approached the hill in the darkness, the two S.I.D. men were aware of much activity going on around them. They heard the cries of foremen, the grunts of laborers, the chuff-chuff of old-fashioned combustion engines, and the high, shrill whining of a single highpowered atomotor.

Rocky glanced at the New Boston Factor inquisitively.

“Mining, Grossman—already?”

Grossman chuckled.

“Mining, yes. But not for what you think. Before we mine for wealth, we must mine for power.”

“Mine for power?”

“You shall see in a moment what I mean.” Grossman motioned one of his native aides to him. “Ho, there! He is secure? The mighty one is shackled as I commanded?”

“Yes, O Master. He is bound wrist and ankle.”

“Good! And the excavation?”

“Proceeds on schedule, Master. By dawn it should be finished.”

“That is well. For if he still grows—”

“He does, O Master!”

“—dawn will be none too soon. The cavern will no longer hold him.”

Bud whispered to his friend and superior, “Say, what goes on here? What are they talking about?”

“If I’m not greatly mistaken,” answered Rocky, “the thing for which those manacles were made.”

Verification of his guess came almost immediately. Again their guards prodded them forward, and behind Grossman they entered a passageway dipping into the side of the hill. Through an ancient tunnel, damp and malodorous, they marched, debouching finally into a gigantic cavern . . . a huge bubble of emptiness blown into the solid rock in some forgotten geologic age of change.

And there at last before them stood . . .

No . . . it did not stand. There was no longer room for it to stand upright in an underground cavern whose roof was but three hundred feet high. It crouched. It knelt upon all fours like a great, mute beast; knelt and stared with dumbly questioning eyes at the tiny motes now entering its lair to look upon it.

It had been secured, as the Titanian had said, with great metal manacles, from the welded joints of which stretched mighty chains so huge that a man might walk upright through a single loop. Its wrists were also gyved, and a length of chain swung between the two.

But it made no effort to fight these bonds. It just crouched there in the strange semi-gloom, watching with pale-gleaming eyes the movements of its self-proclaimed Master.

Subconsciously Rocky Russell had been expecting just some such revelation as this. Even so, it was one case where realization of an idea far surpassed speculation. A gasp of sheer astonishment wrenched itself from his lips; he stared at the giant with shocked incredulity.

"Colossus!" he choked. "Lord—the Colossus himself, come to life! Grossman, where did you find this—?"

Grossman smiled urbanely.

"Not a bad name for him, Captain. Your brief period of masquerade as a mythologist apparently left some impression on you. Colossus—yes! But this time no brainless monster of brass. A living creature, intelligent and obedient to my commands. You, there!" He turned and addressed his slave, again utilizing the menavisa unit. "You know your orders? You know what must be done?"

The creature had telepathic power commensurate with its bulk. The mental answer came rolling into the brains of the Earthmen with almost audible force.

"I know my orders. I know what must be done."

"And who is Master? Whose will must be obeyed?"

This, thought Rocky with swift distaste, was sheer braggadocio, and typical of Grossman. It was not necessary to bludgeon a servile answer out of the gigantic captive. He had already proven his point.

But if the question had been intended to elicit a humble deference, it failed in its purpose. For the Colossus did not answer. Instead, it continued to stare down at its accoster mutely, speculatively. Almost, thought Rocky, defiantly.

"Well?" repeated Grossman. "Who is Master here?"

And this time, whipping a tube from his holster, he accompanied the question with a rapier-like lash of fire that swept across

the Colossus' hurriedly upraised palm. For at sight of the gun, at the crackle of the heat-beam, the giant had begun to stammer a hasty answer—

"You, O Master! You are Master! You—"

And then, as suddenly as it had begun—it stopped! And over its features spread a strange, strained look. What that expression meant, Rocky could not guess. It seemed to mirror surprise. Vast, pleased surprise. The giant lifted the palm across which Grossman's ray had swept and studied it with sluggish interest. It drew a finger of its other hand across what should be a badly burned piece of flesh . . . and began smiling. It was an evil smile. There was no mirth in it. Just grim, savage exultation. And determination!

Then deliberately it reached forward—and attempted to grasp Grossman!

This time it was the Factor who fell back hurriedly. A cry burst from his lips, he pointed the Haemholtz at the giant and coldly, murderously, turned its ray to the maximum concentration. The air of the confined quarters seethed and crackled with blistering heat as the livid flame blasted its way to its target.

But the Colossus . . . *laughed!*

It was the first time human ears had ever heard a sound from that inhuman throat. Nor did those who heard it ever want to hear it again. From those great, gaping lips towering yards above them peeled a deep-pitched torrent like the simultaneous rolling of a thousand summer thunders. It was a sound to batter, blast and deafen the eardrums. Were it not for the bulgers in which they were clad, the Earthmen would in that moment have been stricken with instantaneous deafness. As it was, Rocky's ears rang fearfully with the vibrations of the Colossus' laughter, muted, as the sound was, through his helmet diaphragm.

And Grossman's flame . . . meant nothing. The Colossus ignored it as if it were a dancing sunbeam briefly flickering across his flesh. Again he stretched forth an avid, clutching hand . . .

Grossman screamed aloud in panic fear . . . and ran! Into the narrow tunnel he darted, where that mighty hand could not follow and close about him. Through the tunnel, out and up from the depths of the underground cavern. Behind him ran the unguarded duo he had called his captives.

At the mouth of the tunnel, attracted by the tumult, were gathered a knot of Titanians. To these Grossman panted swift commands.

"The mouth of the tunnel . . . close and block it immediately.

The Colossus has gone mad. And the excavation, stop working on it!”

“But, Master . . . it is almost finished!”

“All the worse! Fill it in again. He must not break free. He will destroy us all!” Grossman turned to Rocky and pawed at him beseechingly. “Russell, call the Base! Tell the Colonel to send men here . . . guns! This creature—”

Russell said sternly, “Rather sudden change of heart, Grossman. A few short minutes ago the Colossus was your ally, the aide through whose efforts you were going to force the Patrol off Titan and gain sole possession for yourself.”

“That doesn’t matter now. I was ambitious . . . yes. I had dreams of being a king, an emperor. You know why, Russell. You are a clever man. You guessed the reason for the T-radiation. But I did not dream, when the egg was hatched two days ago, that its occupant would continue to grow . . . and *grow* . . . and GROW!” Grossman’s voice rose hysterically. “It is a madness from space, come to kill us all. I thought at first I could use It, bend It to my will. It was afraid of flame. But now It has grown too large, Its flesh too thick, to mind such puny weapons. It is strong, Russell . . . inconceivably strong. It is practically invulnerable—”

Bud said, “But what you’re doing ought to hold it in check. If you bury it alive . . . don’t feed it . . .”

“Feed it!”—Grossman laughed mirthlessly. “It doesn’t *need* feeding! Don’t you understand . . . it has never been fed a mouthful in its life!”

“Never been—!” Rocky stared at the shaking Factor. “But—but do you realize what that means? It does not eat—yet it continues to grow. From *somewhere* it must be deriving the nourishment to gorge its cells. From somewhere—”

“Rocky!” Bud’s voice interrupted him suddenly. It was a voice cracked with terror and strain. “Rocky—quick! We’ve got to get out of here! Look! The earth! Quaking—”

His warning was superfluous. All present had experienced the trembling at the same time, a violent, insistent rocking of the soil beneath their feet. Now gaunt Titanians, panic-stricken, were fleeing in all directions. Grossman had stumbled and fallen to his knees. Rocky bent over him, lifted him by main force and howled into his ear,

“A roller, Grossman! You must have a private roller somewhere around here! Where is it?”

“O-over there!” The Factor pointed uncertainly at a gray bulk dim in the gloom.

"Then come on!" snapped Rocky. "We've got to get to New Boston!"

"N-new Boston? The city? But—but why? We want to get to the Patrol Base—"

"New Boston," Rocky grated, "first. That's where you sent Lynn Graham—remember? Gad! I didn't think he could do it! But he is! Start this roller, Grossman, and let's get out of here—quick! Look! The Colossus—"

The others stared, and a little whimper escaped Grossman's slack lips as he saw the final act of the drama which had begun with the trembling of the earth beneath them.

The thin iridescence of the hillside was seamed and cracked with a myriad of tiny black veins. The whole hummock quivered and trembled as though stricken with some petrologic ague. And then, suddenly, with a crash like that of rolling doom, the whole crown of the hill seemed to erupt explosively before them. Gigantic boulders ripped loose from ancient bedrock and raced wildly down tattered slopes. A myriad of tiny fragments burst skyward, sifted down as a hail of deadly debris. There came the rending, tearing, grating sound of stone grinding against stone . . . cacophonous background for the cries of maddened Titanians, the screech of roller motors roaring into action, the moans of injured and dying natives. Then—

Then Colossus burst from the womb of the hampering earth! Rose to stand upright in the prison he had outgrown. He shook himself, and detritus scattered about the terrified watchers. He raised a great palm, and with demoniac deliberation brought it squarely down upon a tiny band of huddled and terrified natives. When he lifted his palm again it dripped redly!

Rocky thrust the fumbling Grossman from the controls. "Move over! Let me at the stick—"

In a flash he had started the roller's motor, sent the speedster tearing headlong and recklessly across the broken desert flooring. Not a moment too soon. For the Colossus, having once shed blood, now swung into a literal orgy of savage destruction. Like a huge, brainless automaton he flailed the hillside about him clean of every moving thing . . . beating with gigantic, steel-hard fists at anything and everything he saw, until that thing lay like a flattened pulp upon the ground.

And all the while horrendous laughter peeled incessantly from his contorted lips. Laughter which carried to New Boston, miles away; even to the Patrol Base beyond the city. Laughter which

struck terror into the hearts of listeners who did not know as yet—happily!—whence it came, or the awful fate which lay in store for them.

For Colossus wearied, now, of lingering in his pit. He placed a palm on either side of the chasm he had opened for his escape, and vaulted easily to the surface. The enormous manacles with which his captors had hoped to hold him dangled uselessly. The ground shuddered beneath him. Where his feet met earth they forced depressions. Colossus was drawing sustenance, now, at ever-increasing speed from the soil which fed his odd, unnatural appetite. Already he was taller than New Boston's highest building. More than a quarter mile he towered into the air. And still he grew.

IX

Lynn Graham, plodding at long and weary last into the outskirts of the city, wondered again—with the vague, dull incuriosity which was the only emotion of which her exhausted brain was capable—what had been the meaning of those sounds she had heard from the desert wastes behind her a few hours ago.

It was all very mysterious . . . mysterious and alarming. First had come the wails. Not wails, really, but dreadful, earsplitting howls like the bellowing of some monstrous beast. Then out of the darkness behind her had come hurtling a small roller. A madly ricocheting vehicle without lights. She had attempted to signal the driver . . . but in vain. As well try to hitch a ride on a runaway comet as on that speeding car.

And now? Now she was entering a city which ought to be asleep, but, instead, was seething with furious activity. Lights shone from the windows of buildings, shacks, stores. Crowds congregated at corners, huddled groups of frightened figures that looked astonishingly like mobs of refugees.

It was as though a mass-panic had seized the entire city. Earth-men gathered their families fearfully about them; Titanians scurried, slithered, hobbled in every direction in helter-skelter confusion. Vainly Lynn accosted passers-by in search of an explanation. Her queries were met with terror-numbed stares, with mumbles, with incomprehensible mouthings.

"We heard . . . Danger approaching . . . Someone said . . . Must leave the city . . . They told us . . . Giant beast . . . Death . . ."

Despairing of ever learning the truth from such informants, Lynn fought her way to a public audio booth. After a longer-than-usual wait, her call was put through. Over the selenoplate she

stared into the worried eyes of her father.

A prayer of relief and gratitude escaped the Colonel as he recognized his caller.

"Lynn! Thank the Lord you're safe! I've been worried sick about you. And so has that young doctor—"

"Rocky? You mean he and Bud escaped? They're with you at the base?"

"Roswell—I mean *Russell*—is. Mulligan has gone out with the Fleet on scout patrol."

"F-fleet?" stammered Lynn. "Scout patrol? Daddy—what is this all about? I seem to be the only person on this world who doesn't know what's wrong—"

A voice at the other end of the wire said politely, "May I, sir?"—and Colonel Graham's face faded back to be replaced by the grave, sharp-lined features of the young S.I.D. captain. "Lynn—" he began, and even in that tense moment Lynn Graham found time to wonder that he had dropped all pretense of formality—"Lynn, we are all in the gravest peril. Colossus has broken loose!"

"Co-colossus?"

"The *Thing* for which those manacles were forged. It turned out to be a giant humanoid. Bud and I saw it. It was more than a thousand feet tall when it escaped Grossman. Now it has more than doubled that height!"

Lynn gasped.

"But—but where is it?"

"After it broke from its underground cell it headed west. For almost seven hours it has been roaming the planet wildly and at will. It completely destroyed the mining-town of Hawesbury and the villages of Placer and Dry Ditch."

"But aren't we doing anything to stop it? It must be destroyed—"

"Three flights are out looking for it. Two haven't been able to contact it at all . . . the third is unreported. We fear that flight . . . found it!" Russell's voice was more sober than ever. "Lynn . . . our weapons seem to be useless against it. Its skin is incredibly tough, hard, resistant. Heat does not bother it, and our heaviest HE shells are like pebbles upon a hippo's hide."

"But there must be *some* way—"

"There has *got* to be some way," nodded Russell, "for if we don't find it . . . and soon . . . Titan will be a dead world, peopled by a single, monstrous entity. Now—" He abandoned explanations for a more immediate problem—"you stand tight. I'm coming to New Boston to get you."

"Oh, that's not necessary. I'll hire a transport."

"There's no such thing. The road between here and the city is and has been thronged with refugees for hours. I don't believe there's a commercial roller left in the city. Because, you see—"

"Yes?" pressed Lynn as he hesitated.

"Never mind. I'll be right there for you."

"You were going to tell me something, Rocky. What?"

"Well," said Rocky reluctantly, "I guess you'd better know. According to the seismograph, Colossus has almost completed his circumambulation of Titan . . . and is on his way back toward New Boston. You must be very, very careful. And now, goodbye! See you later!"

The circuit faded, and he was gone. Lynn stood for a moment thinking swiftly. Then she decided. Better to *do* something than to just sit waiting . . . waiting . . . waiting . . . in a city gone mad with fear. She would start toward the Base *now*, meet Rocky on the way.

Having made her decision, she turned quickly and took her place in the jostling throng pressing southward . . .

Rocky, moving north on the New Boston safeway, as he wormed his roller through the ever-thickening mass of panicky Titanians and terrified Earth colonists rushing to the safety of the Base was once again—for perhaps the hundredth time—trying to grasp that elusive half-thought which had lurked in the back of his brain ever since Colossus had broken free.

Something Grossman had said—Grossman, who now cowered in a Patrol cell, far from the haughty, autocratic figure he had pretended to be—had brushed a spark in Rocky's mind. But now that spark had dulled, and Rocky could not recapture it. It had something to do with Colossus . . . it suggested some means of combating . . .

"*Damnation!*"

The hordes of refugees had been parting like a flesh sea before him ever since he left the Fort gates. But now the numbers were becoming so great that he could not move the roller through them except at a crawl. He realized this, and gave up the unequal struggle. He called an Earthman to him.

"Here, you—can you drive a roller?"

"Yes, indeed, sir!"

"Then take this back to Colonel Graham at the Fort. Tell him Captain Russell is going ahead on foot."

The colonist stared at him strikingly. "You—do you mean you're going back toward the city, sir? But you can't do that! It—"

it's suicide. They say a huge monster, ten miles tall, is coming to smash the city to pieces—"

Rocky said tightly, "Never mind that now. You give my message to the Commandant—*understand?*" And he climbed from the car and forced his way against the tide, northward on foot.

It was as he was pressing along that he thought of Bud Mulligan, who had gone out with "B" flight in an effort to find and destroy—or at least delay—Colossus. Thinking of Bud reminded him that they wore on their persons the means of constant communication. The chances were greatly against Bud's being on the beam, but it was worth a try. He took the miniature vocoder from his breast pocket and activated it on the secret S.I.D. wavelength. Vastly to his surprise, he got an immediate reply.

"O.Q., chief! Where in Tophet have you been? I've been buzzing you for the past hour and a half!"

Rocky signaled back, "Where are you, Bud?"

"Look north," ordered Bud, "and east . . . about thirty thousand elevation. If you see five black dots in the sky, they ain't asterisks—they're us. Flight B, keeping an eye on the Mountain that Walks Like a Man."

"Then he—he's in sight?"

"How can you miss him? He's bigger than the landscape. Can't you see him yet?"

"No."

"Well, I'm afraid you will. He's heading your way now. Keep an eye on the horizon and—"

A sudden roar rose from the throngs swarming the safeway. It was a roar of fear, but deeper even than the note of fear was that of awe. Rocky, looking up from his vocoder swiftly, beheld two things simultaneously. First—the dawn of a new day. Saturn-rise, breaking swiftly, suddenly, over the horizon, brooming all shadows in its path immediately. And the second phenomenon—

Colossus! Colossus rising over the horizon . . . a head, then mighty neck, broad shoulders, naked torso . . . rising from the other side of the world like a vast, bestial nightmare. A tremendous Colossus whose head was so far above the veiled cloudlets of Titan that from time to time he was forced to bob and weave in order to avoid collision with the "rogues," those tiny bits of cosmic debris escaped from Saturn's Ring which besprinkle space in the neighborhood of the girdled planet.

"Rocky!" Bud was chattering on the vocoder. "Rocky, what's the matter. CX, Rocky Russell. CX, Rocky Russell . . . Are you all right, Rocky?"

Rocky answered slowly, "I'm all right, Bud. But I just saw him. We all just saw him. He—he's tremendous!"

"You're telling me? See them manacles? He's grown so big they've split in half right up the back! They look like the only reason they're hanging on is because they're imbedded in his flesh! And his height . . . Whew! The navigator here just shot an estimate! Over six thousand feet, Rocky! Colossus is more than a mile high!"

Rocky said, "Keep on the beam, Bud, and don't mind if I don't answer you immediately. I'm fighting my way north on the safe-way, hunting for Lynn. She's in New Boston—"

"New Boston!" Bud's voice was horror-stricken. "My Lord, no! She mustn't be, Rocky! That's where he's heading for right now. He can see it . . . he's got a glint in his eye . . . a blood-lust . . . Oh, great gods of space . . . Rocky!"

The voice died in a tiny wail.

Russell needed no explanation of his agonized words. For he, too, saw the climax of that frightful action. Colossus had climbed completely over the horizon, now. There was no doubt he had spotted the city. He seemed fascinated by its twin towers. Like a destructive child experimenting with some new toy he leaned over, gripped the spire of the nearest between a massive thumb and forefinger . . . and snapped it off!

From the shard of stone and metal wherein a few desperate fugitives had taken refuge dropped tiny motes, tumbling hundreds of feet to certain, dreadful doom! Rocky could not hear their screams . . . but he could imagine them. One of those black fragments *might* have been . . . *could* have been . . .

He shook his head doggedly. No! He must not think of such things! Lynn still lived. *Must* live!

Then another sound burst so close to him that for a moment his tense nerves shrieked in agony. A mighty hissing roar . . . the explosive blast of a rotor-gun going into action. Glancing to his right he found himself beside the very gun-embrasure wherein yesterday—"Lord, only yesterday? Not a hundred thousand centuries ago!"—a jovial gunner had told "Dr. Rockingham Roswell" fabulously genial tales of monstrous beasts. Could either of them have guessed that today . . .

"Gunner!" he cried.

The old warrior glanced up, identified him amongst the hordes of refugees. "Oh, you, Puffessor! Come on! I'm shorthanded here, Crew didn't make it afore the attack. If you're still lookin' for fab'lus monsters, here's y'r chance to git some fust-hand experience—"

Rocky needed no second invitation. A terrible rage was upon him, now. Futile to attempt to any longer buck the mob to New Boston still more than three miles away. If Lynn had been in the city, neither he nor any man could help her now. The only thing he could do was . . . avenge her . . .

He dropped into the pit, and swung instantly into action. "What do you need here? Oh—short a prime-loader, eh? All right, Gunner—" He spun toward the charge-rheo, jazzed its fill to max, slammed home the breech of the rotor, snapped, "O.Q. Charge set!"

"Range," said Gunner mechanically, "*Fire!*" The beam blasted away. Then, and only then, did the old fighter seem to realize what had happened. His leathery old face crinkled, and he stared at Rocky in bewilderment. "Hey, wait a minute! What's goin' on here? Puffessor, where did you ever learn to prime-load a Mallory rotor?"

"The same place," grunted Rocky, "you saw a purple bird with six green wings and a lavender tail! Stop loafing! Let's give that beast another bellyful. Charge set!"

"Range," said Gunner automatically, "*Fire!*" A slow grin overspread his face. "Comets! Looks like I pulled the wrong guy's leg, hey?"

But not long did Rocky work with the gun-crew. Came another buzz from Milligan, aloft. And this time the S.I.D. sergeant's news was worse than ever before.

"It's no good, Rocky. Neither the groundfire nor our aerial blasts are having any effect on him. Heat-beams don't even make his muscles twitch, and as for physical ordnance—the shells don't even penetrate his hide."

Rocky cried, "But there has to be some way to stop him, Bud! He's practically on top of New Boston now. After that, he'll turn on the Patrol Base—"

"And crush us all out," conceded Bud dolefully, "Like a bad kid stamping out an ant-heap. That's all we are to him. Just so many ants. No, there's only one way left. The Flight Leader has decided we've got to use ourselves as human shells, Rocky. Bullets won't harm him, but if we can smash these ships into some vulnerable spot . . . his eyes . . . perhaps we can kill him before we . . . we . . ."

"*Wait!*" cried Rocky. "*Ants! That's it! Not ants—but Antaeus!* Bud, listen carefully! Those craft are equipped with repulsor beams?"

"Why—why, yes, but—"

"Then contact your Flight Leader immediately. Tell him these are orders. As an S.I.D. agent it is your privilege to take over any command in case of urgency. I want the three ships of your flight to turn on their repulsor beams to maximum strength—and bear down on the Colossus!"

"B—but, Rocky—"

"Do as I say!"

"Y—yeah, sure. But if they don't lift him?"

"Don't be an ass! Repulsors are used to move asteroids from trade-lanes, aren't they? Colossus is huge, but no bigger than thousands of asteroids! They'll lift him off the face of this world!"

"And—and then?"

"Then we shall see," said Rocky grimly, "if I have saved us, or just given us a few minutes' grace. If I'm wrong, he'll fight his way free as soon as the repulsors wear down. But if I'm right—"

"Well?"

"I've got to be right! And now—get going!"

"Y—yessir!" gulped Bud obediently, and disconnected to contact the Flight Commander of the spacevessels.

Thus it was that a few moments later, as Rocky and Gunner lay in their pit watching hopefully, as the unceasing throngs continued to block the safeway, casting fearful looks back over their shoulders as they fled from one doomed place to another, that the five ships gathered together momentarily . . . then separated . . . then converged on the Colossus in a narrow V—their prows invisibly pouring repulsor radiation at the gigantic creature.

The reaction of Colossus was the only thing which assured Rocky his plan was being carried out. For the repulsor radiation was colorless. But as the ships neared Colossus, he bent, momentarily, at the middle as if he had suffered a surprise thrust in the belly or groin. Then an expression of anger crossed his features.

The ships were coming in beneath the protection of a cloud-bank, but Colossus spotted them. He flailed a whiplike arm at them as a pettish child might sweep at bothersome flies . . . but to no avail. The speedy craft swirled away, but kept their prows pointed at his midriff.

Again Colossus struck at them, and smashed one. Then a new idea struck him. Reaching above his head, by sheer force he tugged from a satellitic course about Titan a rogue rock of tremendous size. A rock which must have been every bit of fifteen hundred feet in diameter, a shard of matter hewn into a perfect sphere by long ages in the Rings of Saturn.

This he clutched and aimed at the spacecraft. Let it be hurled upon them, Rocky knew, and in an instant every spark of life would be dashed from existence as the metal walls of the ships were beaten flat.

But the sphere was not hurled! It was the Colossus who gave way . . . not the ships! The cumulative pressure of the repulsor beams caused him to yield, bend, stagger! He tried to regain his balance with a lurching stride forward . . . and thus it was that the twin towers, pride of New Boston, were destroyed. Colossus' left foot descended crushingly upon the buildings . . . and when it withdrew a moment later, a yawning hole gaped where had been city streets . . . a hole partly filled with the crumbled masonry of the once-proud skyscrapers . . .

But Colossus staggered back one step . . . and another . . . and still another. Then one foot slipped into the air—*and did not descend!* After it went the other foot. And Colossus *was off the ground!* Off the ground and being pressed farther and farther out into space with every passing moment!

A great cheer . . . a cheer which had in it half a sob . . . rose from the safeway beside the gunnery-pit. Rocky Russell, glancing up at the hordes who had turned to behold this last-moment salvation, felt a moment of pain strike at his heart.

Saved! A world . . . and all these . . . saved. But the one most important person in this or any world . . .

And then he saw her! She had been fighting beside him in this very pit . . . weary, disheveled, eyes haggard . . . but still, to him, beautiful! And it could not have been mere coincidence that she saw him at the same moment. Their eyes met and no longer was there need for words. Both knew what the other was thinking . . . both accepted the decisions of their hearts gladly. Without a word she turned and fled into the circle of his arms.

While up above, Bud Mulligan was signaling desperately, "Rocky! CX, Rocky Russell. Dammmittahell, where are you? What do we do now? Our beams can't hold this mountain up here forever? What do you want us to—*Great guns of grief!*"

Colossus . . . dwindled! Like a tinfoil effigy held over a flame, his tremendous bulk began to slough away. It did not fall off in chunks or dots. There was no destruction of his flesh, not horrid streams of blood flowing from open wounds. Colossus simply . . . *disappeared!*

A mile-high roaring monster, pinned on invisible repulsor beams . . . then a half-mile creature screaming in panic . . . then a massive Thing a thousand . . . five hundred fifty . . . five . . . two

feet tall. Then a small, gray, shapeless wisp hanging like a shredded tatter in space . . . a sudden, silent puff of flame . . . then nothing . . .

So found its final resting place the Thing which came from afar. The Thing which, in accordance with the theories of a scientist It had never heard of, had journeyed through black space to spawn on a hospitable world.

So ended another of Nature's blind attempts to convey a life form from one galaxy to another. So ended—Colossus!

X

Afterwards, Bud Mulligan said solemnly, "if you didn't see it very plain from where you was, I ain't going to explain what it looked like. It was . . . well, ugly. That's all. What I *want* to know is . . . how did you know it would dry up and crumble away if we could lift it off the ground, Rocky?"

Russell grinned. He said, "I suppose you'd be highly chagrined to learn it was really you who gave me the idea?"

"Me?"

"Yes. When you mentioned 'ants'. The word reminded me of a dim thought I had been trying all day to recapture, without success. It reminded me of—Antaeus."

"Aunty *who*?"

"Antaeus. You'll find his story in the folk-tales of our mother planet, Earth. Hercules, while engaged on his famous 'Labors' met this giant in mortal combat. Antaeus was a son of Mother Earth, and from her he derived his tremendous strength. Each time Hercules felled him, he grew larger. At last the hero discovered Antaeus' secret, and overcame him by lifting him completely above his head. Antaeus then dwindled . . . as did our own Colossus . . ."

"Comets!" gaped Bud. "That's exactly what happened? But why?"

"Because," explained his friend, "Colossus devoured not food, as we do—but *energy*! Raw, radiant energy. Titan not only fed him . . . it gave him a *banquet*! The storage-battery which is this planet—"

"Eh?" interrupted Colonel Graham, startled. "What's that, Captain? Storage-battery?"

"Yes, Colonel. That is the secret of Titan, the secret Grossman learned and hoped to capitalize on after he had frightened or forced all other Earthmen . . . including the Space Patrol . . . off this globe.

"Titan is not simply a world . . . it is a gigantic storage-battery! It's 'acid seas' and 'metallic mountains' are a parallel of the simple voltaic cell. The mysterious 'T-radiation' is nothing more nor less than constantly reversing polarity on a gigantic scale. Humans are destroyed by it for the same reason they die in an electric chair. Titanians can endure it because they are endowed with the physical characteristic of being 'poor conductors.'

"Colossus *fed* on this steady stream of current, and in him electrical energy transmuted into matter. How, we do not know . . . nor will we ever, now . . . unless some day another of Colossus' race is cast by the tides of time upon the shores of one of our solar planets . . ."

"Which," whispered Bud, "God forbid! Well, it just goes to show you, everything happens for the best, doesn't it? I mean, if you hadn't masqueraded as a Doctor of Mythology so we could trap Grossman and shove him into clink, like he now is—"

"I might not have guessed," acknowledged Rocky, "the reason for Colossus' bulk. Yes, that's right. But speaking of myths—"

He turned to the girl.

"Oh, it's not *you* I want to ask, but your father. I would like to know, Colonel Graham . . . have I permission to track down one final 'myth' as 'Dr. Roswell' . . . and make her become 'Mrs.' Russell!"

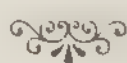
Colonel Graham smiled, "Well, Captain—" he began.

But Bud interrupted him, groaning.

"Migawd, what a terrible pun! You had to stretch that one a mile, Rocky!"

It was then that Lynn Graham proved herself a suitable future wife in all respects. For she smiled gently, and:

"Well, why not, Bud?" she demanded. "According to the old adage . . . 'A myth is as good as a mile' . . ."





Pawns of Chaos

Beyond the Ringed Gateway of Flame, Kerry Shane
and Lynn Gregory Battle Valiantly to Save
Twin Planets from Doom!

CHAPTER I

The Light Bubble

LYNN GREGORY WAS QUITE PROVOCATIVE.
“Please, Kerry,” she coaxed.

“No!” said Kerry adamantly.

“But, *please*, Kerry.”

Kerry moodily jangled the ice in his empty glass.

“No!” he said savagely. “Absolutely positively no! I won’t do it, Lynn.”

Now,” she said, “you’re being difficult. Obstinate and difficult.”

“And you’re being unreasonable. Me speak to Vaughn? It’s the craziest thing I ever heard of!”

The restaurant was gay and warm and bright. Lilting music throbbed an undertone for the soft *hssh-hssh* of dancing feet. Broad Street was alive with midnight radiance. Crowds thronged the wine-and-dineries, chattering, and laughing.

But a few miles away, close to the waterfront where rows upon rows of brick houses huddled together like frightened sheep, where silence was thicker and the night-lights thinner, there was darkness. . .





Out of that darkness, a light. Out of the misty fog of autumn midnight a single spark burning suddenly, fiercely, hotly, in midair. Out of the riverside silence a vibrant hum growing swiftly in volume and intensity; a thin, lost whisper of sound swelling with an ominous crackle as the spark blazed into a ball, the ball burst and widened to a blue-hot circle, the circle expanded to a coruscant ring six feet in diameter.

Out of the darkness—just like that—a light. Out of the nothing, a something. Out of the fiery circle, into man's world, a form stirring restlessly, furtively, eagerly.

Bert Mulligan saw the spark and the form and was not afraid. Bert was six feet tall and half as broad; his biceps were as tough as the steel into which he pounded rivets forty hours a week. He was returning home after a pleasant evening at the tap-room. He was comfortably filled with good fellowship and beer. He was interested, but not alarmed. He moved forward curiously.

"Hi, there!" said Bert Mulligan. "What's going on?"

The humming crackle rose to a shrill, high whine. A shimmering radiance flowed from the flaming hoop. The figure within gathered substance and body. Bert's eyes widened.

"Holy Name!" gasped Mulligan. "What—"

His question ended in a gurgle of awed dismay. For at that moment the whining noise which beat upon his ears seemed to heighten in tone, speed up and hurl itself horribly toward the topmost reaches of ultrasonic madness. Racking wave upon wave of sound lashed at his brain, his bones ached as with an ague, his very veins seemed to run with fire.

The blue-white ring burned whiter, hotter. It was a circle of molten emerald, now; then dazzling gold . . . bronze . . . scorching crimson. A gigantic hoop of venous purple, growing in great, surging ripples; spreading, straining at its periphery like an unleashed monster of flame.

And—*it burst!* As suddenly as it had come—it was gone. The inaudible torment of sound ended, the madness left Bert Mulligan's brain, the intolerable heat fled, and nothing remained but the coolness and the night, the familiar streets and smells and midnight-drowsy sounds of the sleeping city.

No—one thing more! The stranger who had come from the flame, he still remained. There was no street-lamp near, but the velvet of night was curdled with creamy stars, and by their pale gleaming the stranger seemed to glow with a silver luminescence. He stood erect staring about him in uncertain fashion. There was fierce glory in his expression. His eyes were bright with triumph. He held in one hand a retrieved object that had tinkled to the pavement when the mysterious circle burst, a metal object which glinted dully in the starlight.

Bert Mulligan stared at him dazedly. "M-mister," he faltered, "what happened? Where did you come from?"

The stranger glanced at him as if seeing him for the first time. He spoke in a hesitant voice, groping for words.

"What . . . you . . . name?"

"I'm Bert Mulligan. Live down the street. In the next block. But where did you come from? I was all alone one minute, and then I seen that—that circle with you in it—" He shook, his head perplexedly. "What is this? A masked ball, or something? Them clothes you're wearing—"

The stranger's eyes appraised Bert's apparel swiftly. "Clothes" he repeated. "I . . . clothes. You . . . clothes . . . I."

The words were stilted, ungrammatical, but the man's meaning was clear enough. Mulligan's hard jaw tightened.

"So that's it?" he said belligerently. "A stick-up? Well, the heck with you, Mister! If you want my "duds"—he balled his fists—"come and get 'em! Over my dead body!"

The newcomer's expression did not change. There was neither spite nor savagery in his tone, just quiet agreement.

"Over . . . you . . . dead body," he nodded quietly. And he slipped, from a belt at his waist, a sort of crystal disc.

Bert Mulligan never completed his forward motion. For a split second a beam from the disc touched him lightly. That was all. He cried, a choking exclamation that ended abruptly in silence, and fell. His body twitched a single time.

The stranger knelt at his side, began tugging at unfamiliar buttons and slides, fumbling with laces. A wan moon found the housetops, paling the sulky stars into sallow rage. The stranger did not hurry, but there was no lost movement in his actions.

The dark streets slept, but the new moon roused the emotions of a prowling cat. The tom cried pleading to whatever tabby might hear; a window flew open and an irate head popped out.

"*Shut up!*" howled the awakened sleeper. "I'll murder that confounded—hey! What's going on down there?"

From behind him came a muttered query and the startled man raised his voice. "It's a hold-up! Right in front of our house! Call the cops, Martha! Hey, you!" He was bellowing now. "What's going on? Police! *Police!*"

A whistle, several blocks away, screeled reassurance. A nightstick rapped its brisk tattoo on the pavement. Lights flashed on in a dozen bedrooms, hallways, doorways. Pajamaed figures loomed black against yellow oblongs. Voices, fearful and angry, petulant and curious, shattered the night's quiet.

The stranger rose from his crouch as the first alarm disturbed him. His hand flew swiftly to his waist. At that moment his accoster had never been in greater danger. But as more lights turned the street to a checkerboard of yellow and black, as new voices took up the cry, he changed his mind.

His mission here was too important. He must not let trifles disturb or delay him. And he had gained his initial objective: clothing. His own garments—

He swung the crystal disc upon the heap at his feet. It burst into flame, and someone screamed:

"*There he goes! I see him!*"

Doors were opening, now, and the rasp of footsteps pounded nearer. The stranger slipped into a nearby areaway, hurdled a fence and sped quietly through the alley beyond.

He did not realize, then, that he had left the little metal object behind. His sole thought was escape. Out of darkness he came; into darkness he vanished. . . .

"I see nothing crazy," said Lynn Gregory, "in asking you to help me get a job on your paper."

"I'd be the crazy one if I did it. Why in blazes do you want to work for the *Trib*, anyway?"

"Because I'm tired of doing nothing. I'm completely fed up with being ladylike and demure and ornamental. I want to go places and see things, do things. I want a career."

"I've offered you one," said Kerry, "a million times. Of course the pay is small, and there's not much room for advancement—but if you're looking for a lifetime job, being Mrs. Kerry Shane is the toughest assignment I can think of."

Lynn smiled. "I'm not afraid of it. And I *do* love you, Kerry, but—don't you see?—I'm not ready for that job yet. I want to do something on my own hook first. I want to prove to myself that I can do something. And I have to do it before we're married, or I'll never know if I could have."

It was tough when she looked at him like that, Kerry thought angrily. It wasn't fair of her to use her eyes in an argument. He looked away, his jaw stubborn.

"Nevertheless," he said, "the answer is still—*no!*"

Lynn Gregory sighed, her brown eyes thoughtful. She was that rarest of all creations, a blonde with the coloring of a brunette. Tawny-brown eyes flecked with gold, a smooth, almost translucent skin that seemed to glow from within.

"In that case," she said, gravely, "in that case, I'm afraid my answer must also be—*no*, Kerry!"

"*What!* Oh, come now, Lynn."

"I won't marry you until I've had my chance. If you won't help me get it—"

Kerry said, "Oh, the devil!" and drummed a spoon gloomily on the tablecloth. "Checkmate, eh?" he said.

"Stalemate, Kerry."

"All right, then—you win! I'll do it. But I hope you get darn sick and tired of newspaper work darn soon. *If* you get the job," he added. "I can't promise that, you know. All I can do is introduce you to Vaughn."

"That's all I want. Will you, Kerry? When?"

Shane looked at his watch. "We might as well get it over with. It's just twelve-thirty, and the office is only a couple blocks away. What's the matter with right now?"

The girl rose joyfully. "What are we waiting for?"

The office of the *News-Tribune* was an oasis of light in the desert of Philadelphia's Independence Square section. On the ground floor, behind huge plate-glass windows which appeared to exert some weird, mechanical tropism on such few late wayfarers as passed by, rolled the massive presses, gushing in prolific stream the already ancient history of yesterday. Two darkened stories, the business offices, intervened—then two high rows of lighted windows marked the working place of the sleepless press.

Kerry had not expected the kind of welcome the city editor gave him. The room was unusually empty, and as he and Lynn entered, Vaughn leaped up with a cry of relief.

"*Shane!* Thank the Lord you dropped by! Listen—"

Kerry said, "Lynn, this is my boss. Sammy, this is Miss Gregory. She wants to—"

"Meetcha!" said Vaughn. "Listen, Irish, we're in a tight fix. There's been a holdup and murder in Kensington, and I haven't a single soul to cover it. Burke and Walker are on vacation, Todd's out sick, and Joe Tolliver's wife is having a baby. You've just got to take over."

"Kensington?" said Kerry. "That's the Thirty-third Ward, isn't it? Tom French ought to be up there."

"I've tried to locate him, but no go. He's probably out closing up taprooms. So hop a cab, will you, and cover it?"

"Okay. I'll call you if it's any good. Let's go, Lynn."

"But, Kerry—you didn't *ask* him!" Lynn wailed.

"Oh! Look, Sammy, Miss Gregory wants to work here. Don't ask me why. I think she's nuts. Got any openings?"

The harassed editor glanced at the clock. "Suppose we talk about it later? No time now. If this is a story, I want it for the town edition. Anyhow, we're overstaffed now. Hurry along, will you, Kerry?"

"Overstaffed!" sniffed Lynn disdainfully. "You must be *under*-staffed if you have to draft a man on his night off. Mr. Vaughn, this means a lot to me. If you'll just let me try."

"Eh?" Sammy Vaughn started, stared, then grinned at her. "Well, maybe you're right. Had any experience?"

"Not professionally. But at Bryn Mawr I edited—"

"Omigosh! A college journalist!"

Kerry snared his chief's eye. "You see, Sammy, Lynn won't marry me until she's had a whirl at the newspaper game. I warned her it's a tough racket," he added meaningfully.

"I see." Vaughn was nobody's fool. He liked to see his men

married. It made them more dependable. He turned to Lynn soberly. "Kerry's right, Miss Gregory. This *is* a tough racket. Good reporters, like Kerry, are born—not made."

"All I want," cried the girl, "is a chance. I might be one of those 'born' reporters, too, for all you know!"

Precious moments were fleeting. Vaughn scowled and shrugged and surrendered—with reservations. "All right. A chance is all you want? I'll give you one."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Vaughn!"

"Wait a minute. You cover this killing with Kerry. You both start from scratch. Now, I don't expect you to turn in a *better* story than Shane. After all, he's an experienced man. But if you turn in a story anywhere near as good as his, with any news angle or human-interest slant he misses, I'll give you a job. Otherwise, no go. Fair enough?"

Only Kerry saw his wink. Kerry grinned. "Swell!"

And: "Right!" agreed Lynn. "Kerry, let's go!"

CHAPTER II

The Metal from Nowhere

"I seen him," said Mr. Moriarity, "as plain as I see you now, Mister. A big man, he was—"

"He was a small man," contradicted neighbor Gruener.

"A *big* man," repeated Mr. Moriarity doggedly. "A big man with black^h hair."

"He was blond!" corrected Mrs. Pasquale.

"Black hair!" insisted Mr. Moriarity. "He had black hair and eyes. What I figure, he slugged this guy, see? And he taken off him everything he had. Even his clothes. When I came down," said Mr. Moriarity modestly, "I seen how the cor-puss didn't have nothing on. So I called to my wife that she should bring a blanket, which I flang over it."

"I see, said Kerry. "Well, thank you, Mr. Moriarity. Lynn, ready to go?"

He had gone about his own work, leaving the girl strictly on her own. Now she returned from her questioning of the few neighbors who still lingered, breathlessly reviewing, for the benefit of any willing listener, their part in the drama.

"Almost, Kerry," Lynn turned to the officer on duty, "Just *where* was the body before they removed it, officer?"

"Right over there, miss. By the curb."

"I thought so!" Lynn's voice was exultant as she held out to

Kerry's inspection an object that glinted dully in the dimly-lighted street. "I found this in the gutter. It might be a clue of some sort, mightn't it, Kerry?"

Kerry fingered it disinterestedly as the policeman shook his head.

"We seen that, lady. It's just a part of an auto, or somethin'. And this guy wasn't in no auto."

"But the woman over there," said Lynn eagerly, "says she heard a 'tinkling noise' when the murderer started to run."

Kerry snorted. "Witnesses are liable to say they've heard anything. Or seen anything. A dozen people saw the killer, but every one describes him differently. Let's go!"

Lynn was still staring dubiously at the bit of metal in her hand. At his words she came to with a start. "Go?"

"Back to the office. Vaughn's short of rewrite men. There's nothing hot enough here to 'phone in, but we might as well go back and write it."

The girl seemed to arrive at a decision. She thrust the oblong into her bag, shook her head. "You go, Kerry. I'm going on home. No, don't worry about me. I'll take a cab."

"Well, if you want to." Kerry grinned. "You must discourage easily, Lynn. Not a long journalistic career."

But she was already stepping into the waiting taxi. A few minutes later, back at the office, Kerry was relating the incident to his city editor.

"And so," concluded Kerry, "she grabbed a taxi and tootled on home to beddy-bye, thus ending the briefest journalistic career in history. Thanks a lot, Sammy. You sure fixed things."

"Forget it," Vaughn said. "Women get those whacky ideas once in a while. Humor 'em and they snap out of it. Well—so there wasn't any story?"

"Same old stuff: boy meets ghoul. An unimportant lug named Mulligan knocked off by a holdup man who lammed."

"Nuts!" said Vaughn regretfully. "I was hoping for a nice, juicy sex murder. No interesting angles?"

"Not a—wait a minute! Mulligan lost his britches."

"Come again?"

"The murderer stripped him. That any help?"

"Not to me. To the murderer, maybe. Oh, well, give me a couple of sticks. It may turn into something."

At his desk, Kerry, with a speed born of long practice, batted out the facts of the case. It was 1:45 when he finished. He was just

tossing his copy to Vaughn when the door opened. Sight of the latecomer lifted his brows.

"Lynn! What are *you* doing here? And Dr. Gregory?"

Lynn's gold-flecked eyes were alive with excitement. By main force she hauled her father, David Gregory, member of the Temple University physics department, forward to confront Kerry and the equally astonished Sammy Vaughn.

"So I discourage easily, do I?" she mimicked Kerry, "Reporters are born, not made, eh? Tell them, Daddy!"

"What's the big idea, Lynn?" Kerry asked.

"You'll find out! Mr. Vaughn, does your offer still hold good? If I come up with an angle Kerry overlooked?"

"Why, I—I suppose so. But really, Miss Gregory, there is no story. Kerry has covered the ground."

"That's what he thinks! There *is* a story! The biggest story that ever broke. Tell them, Daddy!"

Dr. Gregory fumbled in his pocket, brought forth an object Kerry recognized as the metal grill Lynn had found in the Kensington gutter. The professor held it gingerly.

"This—er—object," he said, "is a rectiform metal device tessellated between its exterior plates with a curious arrangement of tetrahedral follicles—"

"H-how's that?" gulped Vaughn.

"He means," interpreted Kerry, "it's an oblong doodolly with metal layers and four-sided holes in it."

"Its purpose is—well, highly conjectural," went on the professor. "But one is led to believe it may have been designed for the retention and subsequent liberation of electrical energy."

"A hunk out of a busted old storage battery!" exploded Kerry. "That's what I figured."

"You're clever," smiled Lynn, too sweetly. "Terribly clever, Kerry. But this time you missed the boat. "Because I *showed* you that object, and you gave it back to me. It wasn't anything, you said. Nothing important."

Kerry said, "Now, look, sugar, don't get upset. I'm sorry I laughed at you. But a broken-down battery—"

"But *what* a battery!" laughed the girl triumphantly. "You haven't heard it all. I knew there was something queer about it. So I took it home to Daddy. He analyzed it in his laboratory. Tell them what you discovered Daddy!"

Dr. Gregory's hands moved on the dull surface of the plate in an almost caressing gesture. "I discovered," he said slowly, "that this 'battery' is constructed of a most amazing material. Even now

I can scarcely believe the accuracy of my own findings. But the metal of which this is made—”

Vaughn's eyes bulged. “Now I get it! Platinum!”

“No, Mr. Vaughn. Something rarer than that.”

“Rarer than platinum? What on earth?”

“That's just it.” There was a baffled, bewildered quality to Dr. Gregory's tone. “Not of earth at all! It is wrought of an element *heretofore entirely unknown to Man!*”

“*What?*” Kerry Shane stared at the man whom he hoped to know soon as his father-in-law. “But that's impossible!”

“No, my boy. Incredible, perhaps. But not impossible. For the proof lies before us.”

Sammy Vaughn said, “Just a minute, Dr. Gregory. If I understand you, this metal doesn't even have a place in the periodic table. Because the last two missing elements, numbers eighty-five and eighty-seven, have been found within the past few years. We ran a Sunday supplement story on it, remember, Kerry? How could there be an element not in the periodic table?”

“You forget,” Dr. Gregory reminded him, “that the so-called ‘periodic table of elements’ is itself only a theory—and one which has already been changed many times. One which may be revised many more times as man's knowledge increases.

“Even within the lifetime of its constructor, Dmitri Mendeléeff, it was found necessary to ‘build a back porch’ on the table for the accommodation of the ‘rare gases’, which did not at all fit into the supposed order of elements. Later on, fifteen separate and distinct ‘rare earths’ had to be grouped into a single space to maintain a semblance of balance. Only recently we have been forced to admit a great number of ‘isotopal’ forms into the table.

“So you see, my boy, the periodic table is a most undependable list of the possible elements!”

“But,” demanded Kerry confusedly, “if there are other possible elements, why can't we find them, see them?”

“An interesting problem, Kerry. But I might draw an analogy between the ‘known elements’ and man's visual powers. Man ‘sees’ light-waves ranging in length from eight ten-thousandths c.m. to four ten-thousandths c.m. But known radiations range up from this to the fifteen-mile-long waves of radio, and down to the cosmic rays measuring one twenty-trillionth of an inch!

“It would be folly to say these other radiations do not exist simply because we cannot see them. There is ample reason, indeed, to believe that certain animals *do* see short and long waves invisible to man. Dogs and cats react to phenomena unseen

by us, bats 'see' in the dark, and at least one eminent biologist has advanced the suggestion that birds-of-prey soar unerringly to carrion because they 'see' the fumes of decaying flesh spiraling into the air."

"You've got something there," conceded Kerry. "But I'm still not satisfied as to how this gadget fits into the picture. Suppose it is a previously unknown element? *Somebody* knew about it, because it's obviously shaped into a bit of mechanism. That implies craftsmanship at human hands!"

Dr. Gregory said soberly, "That is a mystery I shall bend every effort to solve. It is true that at least one man knows the secret of this metal."

Lynn laughed lightly. "Or a bogeyman? Or maybe a man from Mars?" she suggested.

Sammy Vaughn, listening to the conversation with creased brow, started suddenly. And he did not laugh. Instead, he shouted:

"*That's it!*"

Kerry stared at him. "Eh? What's what?"

"The angle I've been looking for, Irish! Can't you see it? It's terrific! 'Man from Mars Slays Stroller; Drops Weapon of Unknown Metal.'"

Vaughn was suddenly the newsman again, conscious that it was past two o'clock, and that the *News-Tribune* should have gone to bed five minutes ago. "Okay. Get going, guy! Rewrite that story of yours. Build it up—make it plenty weird and scarey. We'll give the Philadelphia public something to pop its eyes open in the morning. Get Bo Martin to grab some pix of this battery. Doc, I'd like your affidavit on a statement."

"But, really, Mr. Vaughn, I can't support such a fantastic theory," Dr. Gregory said.

"You don't have to. That's just the news build-up. All I want is your statement that this *is* an unknown element. We'll do the rest. Well, Kerry, move! Don't stand there!"

"And how about me, Mr. Vaughn?"

Vaughn looked at Lynn Gregory with new respect.

"You," he said, "have won yourself a job. Give me a signed story on everything you saw in Kensington. What the witnesses said . . . how you found the battery . . . all that. Go as far as you like with the word-slinging. Because I'm going to splash this all over the front page!"

The girl turned to Kerry with a little cry of joy.

"Oh, Kerry, hear that? I've got a job! Oh, Kerry, isn't it wonderful?"

But it was Sammy Vaughn who stepped between them and pointed Lynn sternly to a typewriter.

"No time for that stuff now!" he grunted. "You're a member of the working press, Miss Gregory. And don't forget, good reporters are born—not *made*!"

"Confound it!" groaned Kerry Shane.

So the presses rolled. But in a far suburb of the city, lurking in streets which now awakened lazily to the gray of dawn, a stranger strode and muttered savagely to himself. A stranger whose height was a trifle too great, whose shoulders a trifle too narrow, to properly fill the suit he wore.

With the dawn came massive trucks, and small boys to pick up the bundles tossed from those trucks. One of these boys took up his matutinal burden and set forth on his daily round. By chance he passed the stranger, by habit addressed him.

"Paper, mister?"

The tall one stared at him, spoke slowly. "Paper?"

"Mornin' *News*. Big story today. Man f'm Mars kills guy wit' a strange wee-pun. Read all about it—*hey*! What's the matter wit' you anyway? Leggo!"

Alarmed, the newsie tried to free himself of the hand that tightened about his arm like a vise. But the stranger knocked the bundle from his grasp, thrust one paper before his eyes and commanded harshly:

"*Read!*"

"Lay offa me, will ya? I ain't got no time . . . I got a route to serve . . . them papers cost money. . . ."

"Money?" The stranger reached into his pocket, drew forth a handful of crumpled bills, forced them upon the boy. "Here is . . . money. Read!"

The newsie gasped and stopped struggling.

"Holy cats! All this, Mister? Jeepers!"

"*Read!*"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Sure, Mister.! Anything you say. Where'll I begin? Up here? Well, it says 'Kensington Killer Drops Object of Unknown Metal' in the subhead. Underneath it says, 'Terror gripped the river districts of Philadelphia when at midnight a mysterious assailant—' "

CHAPTER III

The Stranger Strikes

"So?" asked Sammy Vaughn.

"So," declared Kerry savagely, "for a plugged nickel I'd tell you to take this filthy job, and this poor excuse for a newspaper, and the whole confounded Fourth Estate, and shove 'em up a dark alley! A fine mess you've made of *my* life!"

The editor chuckled. "Lynn trouble, Irish?"

"How can I have trouble with somebody I never get to see?" queried Shane bitterly. "Lynn and I haven't had a date for three weeks. Not since the night we found the mechanical whatsiz. She's taking her job seriously. Every time I call her it's, 'Oh, Kerry, I'm sorry, but I've got to run down to Southwark, or out to German-town, or West Philly.' Bah!"

"She's doing a fine job, though, Kerry. Everybody's talking about those 'phantom fiend' stories of hers."

"Yeah! And that's another thing! She doesn't chase out after society stories or café stuff or tea parties, like any normal sob-sister. No! She has to set herself to track down a killer! First thing you know, my one-time fiancée is going to be laid out on a cold marble slab. Sammy, this gag has gone far enough! Our 'lesson' has backfired."

Vaughn leaned back and toyed with his eyeshade.

"It has indeed, Kerry. When I gave Lynn a job I was just playing along on your side. I thought she'd soon weary of it. Instead, she's turned out to be the best gal reporter this sheet ever had. I'm sorry, boy, but I can't fire her!"

"My pal!" sneered Kerry. "My fine helpful pal!"

"Now, cheer up, Irish! After all, there's no reason why you and Lynn can't get married and both continue working. Thousands of young couples do it."

"No reason," said Kerry gloomily, "except that some dark night they'll drag my bride's body out of the Delaware."

Vaughn chuckled. "She seems to be able to take care of herself. A fine, resourceful girl. That's why I give her free rein. Suppose you stop worrying about her, Kerry? Fret about your own work. You've been easing up on the Gregory story lately. Any new developments?"

"Nary a develop. Old Dr. Hagglesstone of Columbia U. pulled in his horns yesterday. He was the last of the white-beards to admit that Doc Gregory's analysis was correct. He wouldn't agree that the battery was an unknown element until he analyzed it himself, but now he's joined the converts, too. The only die-hard now is that young foreign smart-aleck, Dr. Nestor. You ever meet him?"

"I don't believe so."

"Well, you didn't miss anything. He's a pain in the afternoon if I ever saw one. European, you know. A Hitler refugee. Only he didn't get off the continent fast enough. He's soaked up a little of *Der Phooey's* dictatorial attitude. He spends half his time around Gregory's lab, trying to muscle in on Doc's experiments, and sniffing at Doc's theories."

"Why doesn't Gregory toss him out on his ear?"

"Aw, you know Doc. Easy-going as a kitten. Anyway, scientists are supposed to pester each other like that. It's part of the game. 'My esteemed colleague' stuff, you know."

Vaughn shrugged in agreement.

"Well, keep in touch with Gregory. Maybe he'll find out something one of these days. Meanwhile—"

"Meanwhile"—Kerry Shane had a one-track mind as far as Lynn Gregory was concerned—"how about providing Lynn with some kind of protection? I tell you, Sammy, I'm worried about her. This 'phantom fiend' she's trailing is bad stuff! Twelve victims in two weeks. A newsboy in Bala, a librarian in Frankford, a clothier, a banker, a guard at the Arsenal. Why, darn it, he's a one-man army! And you let Lynn bust out after him as though it were a picnic."

"Let her? Don't be an ass, Kerry! I can't keep her from going. She's got an idea that the phantom fiend somehow ties in with the 'Man from Mars' story. And I'm not entirely sure she's wrong. But if it'll make you feel any better, I will ask the police department to give her a bodyguard. Just as soon as she gets back, Kerry. She's out of town now."

"There you are!" moaned Kerry. "Out of town! And I was hoping for a date tonight. Where did she go?"

"Why, she got a lead on something peculiar down—excuse me!" He reached for a ringing phone, snarled a query down its black throat. "*News-Tribune*. Kerry Shane? Mm, he's here. It's for you, Kerry."

"Hello?" Kerry said. "Oh—you, Dr. Gregory? Sure, I can come right out to your house. But why? Something new on the—no fooling? You *did*! I'll be right there!"

He slammed down the receiver, streaked for the door. Vaughn shouted after him:

"Hey—remember me? Your boss? Do you mind telling me what the devil goes on?"

"Doc Gregory!" Shane's words dopplered back over a disappearing shoulder. "Big stuff! He's finally solved the secret of the battery!"

It took Kerry more than an hour to get to Gregory's German-town home. Mid-morning traffic clogged Broad Street; at almost every street intersection Kerry's progress was delayed by the ogling leer of crimson lights. But finally his finger was on the scientist's doorbell.

He got no response, which was odd. Dr. Gregory had seemed extremely anxious to see him. Kerry rang again, this time listening carefully. He could hear the buzzer snarling at the back of the house. But still no one answered. An instinct older than reason touched the nape of his neck with a sudden, tingling fear. He wasted no more time on amenities. He pushed open the door and walked in.

"Dr. Gregory!" he called. "Hey, Doc! It's Kerry!"

No reply. Fear settling more darkly about him with each passing moment, Kerry hurried to the back of the house, to the elaborately appointed room which was Dr. Gregory's home laboratory. This door was ajar, but as he attempted to force it open it stuck. There was something blocking its movement. Something solid.

Kerry craned his head around the door—and gasped! In a flash he had eeled his way through the crack, and was on his knees beside the prostrate figure of the old physicist!

"Doc! What's the matter?" He drew water from a tap, splashed it on the scientist's face and wrists. "*Doc!*"

And Dr. Gregory's eyes opened. Slowly, flutteringly at first—then widening in sudden, stricken recollection. A cry burst from his lips.

"Kerry—stop him! Don't let him get away with it!"

"Stop who? Get away with what?"

"Nestor! The condenser. He mustn't—" Then a moan trembled from the old man's lips. Holding his aching head, he rose slowly, leaning on Kerry. "What time is it, my boy?"

"Almost eleven."

"Then it's too late. I've been unconscious for more than a half hour. And he has escaped."

Kerry said grimly, "Nestor, eh? I knew that guy was a snake. But why did he smack you down and steal the battery?"

"Condenser, Kerry," corrected Gregory feebly. "Condenser, not battery. I learned that today. I also discovered how to use it. That's why I called you. Shortly after I hung up, he came here. Fool that I am, I told him what I had seen. There were just the two of us. Alone. He was behind me. I remember a sudden, sharp blow, then nothing more. Until you were bending over me, shaking me."

"But *why?*" cried Kerry again. "Why should he do it? That

Nestor is a sneaky heel, Doc, but after all, he's a man of science, like yourself. It doesn't make sense."

Dr. Gregory stared at his young companion strangely.

"No, Kerry," he agreed, "it doesn't make sense. But listen carefully, my boy. For what I have learned makes even *less* sense. Or, rather, it makes sense in a wild, fantastic, almost incredible fashion!

"Dr. Nestor—or the person who called himself that—stole the condenser because it was something he wanted and needed for reasons we can only guess. And just as the metal was of an unknown element, so is he a member of a heretofore unknown, undreamed-of race of beings! For both Dr. Nestor and the condenser came to us *from another world!*"

"From another world?" gasped Kerry. Then a worried look clouded his eyes. He said swiftly, soothingly, "You'd better sit down again, Doc. Take it easy. I'm going to call a medico, let him have a look at you."

Gregory silenced him peremptorily.

"No, Kerry. It's not what you think. I'm quite all right. Listen! As I was experimenting with the bit of metal this morning, I chanced to connect it in series with an ultra-violet lamp—that one over there. When I did so, happened a strange thing. Immediately the lamp flared into brilliance—and for a moment *I looked into the other world!*"

"You did what?"

"Yes! And it is a world very much like our own. It is a civilized world with massive buildings, moving vehicles, and men similar in form and appearance to us!

"A golden sheen rose from the lamp, and through this I looked upon curiously garbed men and women gathered in what seemed to be a market-place, creatures who stopped stockstill at whatever they were doing and stared back at me, as stunned at sight of me as I was at seeing them.

"Just for an instant the vision persisted. Then the lamp bulb exploded and the contact was broken. But I saw! I know now that there is at least one other universe adjacent to our own. And somehow that extra-terrestrial element forms a visual gateway between the two worlds!"

Dr. Gregory paused, and Kerry spoke. "Another universe—adjacent?"

"Yes, my boy." There was a brooding quality, to the physicist's voice, a note of speculative dreaming scarcely in keeping with his reputation as a practical scientist. "I can conceive that elsewhere

in the Space-Time continuum which contains us may exist not only *one* but countless myriads of such other worlds. Not merely one Earth, one Solar System, one galactic universe, but millions such."

"But—but *where*, Doctor?" Kerry asked helplessly.

"Do you remember my explaining the wide range of radiations invisible to man's poor powers? I hinted, then, at this wilder possibility. Just as there are colors we cannot see, so might there be also material objects we cannot feel on what you might call other 'planes' of existence. On other frequencies, other vibrational harmonics. Consider the facts, my boy. The fundamental 'building block' of our universe is what?"

"Why—why, the atom, I suppose."

"Precisely. And just what do we know about the atom? Nothing whatsoever, except that it appears to be composed of one infinitesimal mote of matter, the nucleus, about which revolve other tiny specks known as electrons. These fragments of matter are so diminutive, as compared to the atom, that if the nucleus be considered the size of a pea located in the city of St. Louis, the electrons would be balls only thirty feet in diameter revolving three hundred miles away—through Little Rock, Memphis and Cincinnati!

"Thus the atom, our 'fundamental building block,' is itself more than ninety-nine percent empty space! Now, if we return to our former theorem—that there are visual ranges invisible to man—we gain a corollary. That these tremendous interstices in the atom are *not empty at all*, but are filled with other bits of matter so far undetected by human instruments!

"And *these* bits of matter, vibrating on other planes, form the 'building blocks' for universes adjacent to our own!"

For a moment Kerry was mute, trying to reconcile this radical theory with barely-remembered science from his college days. Then a sudden, more practical thought struck him.

"But Nestor! If he's one of—of Them, he can't mean any good here or he wouldn't have attacked you and stolen the condenser. A half hour's start, eh? Well, we've got to find him. I'll start the wheels moving." He spun to the 'phone, dialed frantically. "That you, Liz? Give me the city desk . . . hey, Sammy? Send out a general alarm. Get the cops to pick up a guy who calls himself 'Dr. Nestor'. About six foot one, blue eyes, blond hair, weighs around a hundred and eighty pounds."

But Sammy Vaughn's voice was even more excited than his own. It fairly crackled back at him. "No time for that now, Irish. Sheer hell's busted loose down here!"

"What do you mean?"

"*Invasion*—that's what! A flaming circle appeared in midair down in Virginia—and thousands of soldiers armed to the teeth, are marching through it! Don't know where they came from or who they are, but everybody's gone nuts! Panic! The Governor of Virginia has radioed Washington for help. Get down here as quick as you can. And bring Doc Gregory. Maybe he can tell us."

"Virginia!" gasped Gregory. "Kerry—what city?"

Kerry relayed the question. Vaughn rasped, "Never mind that now, Shane! I tell you this place is a madhouse! Get down here—quick!"

"Where in Virginia?" roared Kerry again. "Answer me, Sammy, *where?*"

"A little place called Vinton. Suburb just outside of Roanoke. But what difference does it make? Hurry up!"

And he hung up. Kerry turned to Dr. Gregory, whose face was ashen. Something in the older man's eyes rekindled the fear in Kerry's heart.

"Why did you want to know, Doc? Is it Nestor?" he demanded.

Gregory nodded. "I'm afraid so, Kerry. But I wasn't thinking about that. I was thinking of Lynn."

"Lynn? What about her?"

"Lynn," said the old scientist fearfully, "left here last night for Roanoke, Virginia!"

CHAPTER IV

Conquest

Kerry Shane glanced for the thousandth time at his wristwatch, then again at the October-spangled mountains and valleys that rolled beneath him. The sun was brazen-bright, the day smokily-warm and fragrant as only the dog-days can be. Plowed fields below nestled in the cups of hills like squares of homespun on a crumpled patchwork quilt, ribbons of highway laced the piebald landscape like twisted twine, toy towns of doll-size houses clung lazily to the banks of miniature rivers.

It was hard to believe that not many miles from here raged such madness and panic as to stagger the imagination, that this placid countryside, which once had seen warriors in blue and gray lock in deadly battle, was once again witnessing carnage unspeakable. But the tiny radio in the airplane cockpit emitted words between splitting crackles of static that were terror-fraught.

“—off Route Eleven,” the announcer was crying over and over. “Attention, please, all motor traffic! Keep off Route Eleven south to Salem. This road must be kept clear for military movement. The following roads are open to the public: Two-twenty to Rocky-mount, Two-twenty-one to Cave Spring, state highways One-sixteen and One-nineteen. Women and children are advised to evacuate the city *now*! All able-bodied men over sixteen years of age report immediately to Home Guard headquarters. Bring whatever weapons you possess. Attention all motor traffic! Keep off Route Eleven south to Salem. This road must be kept clear for military—”

A howling cascade of static drowned his words. Kerry turned to his pilot tensely. “We nearly there, Buck?”

Buck O’Connor nodded. “Almost. From what that lunk says, though, I don’t think we’d better try for the airport. It’s north of the city, and that section’s in enemy hands.”

“Can you set ’er down somewhere else?”

“Yeah. There’s a swell stadium in South Roanoke. I covered a VMI football game there once. That ought to be okay.” Buck grinned. It was a lean, lopsided grin without a great deal of humor in it. “And to think,” he said, “I took up photography because it was an easy profession!”

“It’s a good thing you took up flying as a hobby,” Kerry told him, “or we’d never have got here. Look! The city!”

A thick, oily smudge rolling sluggishly heavenward marked the location of Virginia’s third largest city. Smoke formed a solid, semi-circular wall about the northern edge of town; the smoky bulwark was based on a foundation of leaping crimson flame. South of the city, broad highways were jammed with scuttling black beetles: fleeing motorcars. As they drew nearer, Kerry saw another ’plane—an Army pursuit ship—lift from the ground and dart suddenly through the gray wall toward the enemy stronghold.

For a moment it hovered gnatlike above the invaders’ terrain. Then a white-hot sphere of incandescence burst from the ground, surrounded it. It flamed for an instant whitely, like a nova in black space—then plummeted earthward. The static cleared, and the announcer’s voice came through again.

“—ing routes are open to the public: Two-twenty to Rocky-mount, Two-twenty-one to—Just a moment, folks! We have just received word that Bob Youse is standing by on Mill Mountain. He will bring you an eyewitness account of the present situation. Take it away, Bob Youse!”

The second speaker's voice came through, strong and resonant, but tinged with a note of grim concern.

"Thanks, Paul. This is Bob Youse speaking from the lookout tower atop Mill Mountain. I'm afraid there is only one way to describe the present situation. Serious! The invaders are in complete possession of Vinton and the northern section of Roanoke. Their advance line runs from Garden City to Williamson Road. A strong force is marching south on Lee Highway toward the Hotel Roanoke which, as you know, has been taken over and fortified by the local Home Guard division.

"No statistics are available on the number of casualties, but we fear they must be enormous. Vinton is a smoking ruin, laid waste in the first hour of the invaders' arrival. Since then, literally thousands of these blond warriors have marched from nowhere, out of thin air, through their fantastic circle of flame, into this world.

"You have heard the CBS broadcast from Philadelphia, in which Dr. Gregory of Temple University warned that the invaders come from another universe parallel to our own. Now I have beside me the daughter of the only American scientist who understood and interpreted this threat to humanity—Miss Lynn Gregory of the Philadelphia *News-Tribune*."

"Lynn!" Kerry's heart leaped, and he clutched Buck O'Connor's shoulder in a grip of steel. "Thank God! On Mill Mountain? Where is Mill Mountain, Buck?"

O'Connor, concentrating on the task of setting down his tiny flier on a football field, bobbed his head briefly. "Right below us. Okay kid—hold your hat! I haven't made many landings on a pocket handkerchief."

But Kerry did not even note and appreciate the skill of Buck's slip-landing. He was listening eagerly to the voice of the girl he loved, a voice vibrant with urgency.

"—plead with you to evacuate Roanoke immediately! I cannot overemphasize the importance of this. Under present circumstances resistance is futile. Any defense which may be made by our Home Guards is sheer, doomed gallantry. The invaders are armed with an entirely new and dreadful weapon—a crystal disc which emits flaming rays of heat. Believe me, I am no defeatist. Were the regular Army here, with the planes and heavy ordnance our President has ordered out, there might be a fighting chance to save the city. But without them, our only hope lies in retreat!"

"Miss Gregory, your father has broadcast a warning that these invaders are not of this world at all, but from another 'plane of existence'. Can you tell us more about that?"

"I can, yes. But there's no time now. It's too complicated. All I can say is—*get out!* And hurry! *Hurry!*"

A sudden jar rammed Kerry's body back into his seat. A second, bouncing jar and the ship wallowed to a stop. Figures came racing across the gridiron toward them.

Buck gazed ruefully at the grandstands hemming them in. "Well, I got *in* here. But Lord knows how I'm going to ever get this crate out again."

He was talking to himself. Kerry Shane had climbed from the cockpit and was already speeding across the field to the dappled rise of Mill Mountain, which loomed not more than a few hundred yards from the stadium.

Several avenues climbed the face of Roanoke's lovely green prominence. Toward the nearest of these Kerry charged, intent on gaining the peak of the nine-hundred foot "mountain." Buck O'Connor, grunting and swearing at his photographic paraphernalia, lumbered along behind him. But they had gone only a short distance up the hillside when their progress came to a rude halt. A sober-faced young man in the blue of the Virginia Home Guards stopped them.

"Other way fellows. This road is closed."

Kerry cried, "But we've got to get to the top of the mountain, friend. It's important."

"Sorry. My orders are to let no one through"

"But—" protested Kerry.

"Okay Kerry." That was O'Connor at his elbow. "The soldier's right." Even in this moment there was a chuckle in the burly photographer's voice. "The guy with the gun's *always* right." And he half-led, half-dragged the still-protesting Shane away, around a curve of the road, out of sight.

Kerry pleaded desperately, "But we've got to get up there, Buck! I don't care what anyone says."

"Okay, Captain Future! Keep your shirt on. I'll get you there. We've got to do some climbing, though. See that raw scar running up the face of the hill over there? That used to be a tram-line. A shuttle-back. It's rough and gravelly, but it's a straight line to the top of the mountain. Nobody will be guarding it. Want to try?"

"Let's go!" said Kerry grimly.

Thus another half hour found them, panting and disheveled but triumphant, emerging from the rubble of the long-abandoned shuttle-back to the brow of the hill. From there it was but a moment's journey to the lookout tower from which Lynn had spoken.

And in a few minutes Kerry was gathering into his arms the girl who ran forward to greet him with a cry of joy.

Lynn looked terribly tired, and the weighty recognition of peril had etched tight lines about her eyes, but new strength seemed to surge through her at Kerry's arrival.

"Kerry, you came! They said it was impossible, but somehow I—I knew you would."

The radio announcer who had been her companion moved forward anxiously.

"If you're friends of Miss Gregory's," he said, "I suppose you know what you're doing. But I'm afraid you made a mistake in coming here. Miss Gregory called the shot, all right. Roanoke's a doomed city. The sooner we get away from here, the better off we'll be."

Buck O'Connor, who numbered among his other gifts a phenomenal memory, stared at the radioman curiously.

"You're Bob Youse!" he declared flatly.

"That's right, chum."

"I saw you play once." Buck added an aside to his friends, "Rose Bowl. 1931, wasn't it? You played end for Washington State against Alabama."

Youse grinned ruefully. "That's right. Wish you'd forget it, though. I'd like to. They licked the pants off us, twenty-four to nothing."

Buck grunted. "Mm-hmm! Might have been twenty-four to six if you hadn't fumbled that forward in the third quarter, though. But this is a heck of a time to be talking about football. What's the set-up now?"

The ex-athlete's embarrassment faded in an expression of concern. "Bad! Here—take a look!"

He led the way to the brow of the hill. The scenic promontory afforded a vantage point from which all the surrounding countryside could be viewed. Westward sprawled the city of Roanoke with its quiet, shaded streets. Still farther westward ribboned the highways to Salem, over which were now crawling an incessant stream of khaki-colored vehicles, insect-like from this high spot.

"That's the regular Army coming up," explained Youse. "And over there—"

He pointed eastward and Kerry, following the motion of his hand, gasped. What he had expected to see, he did not exactly know. But nothing so completely horrible, so utterly devastating, as that which met his gaze. For the far side of Mill Mountain,

which twenty-four hours before had been gentle and green and lovely country-side, was now a desolate, parched plain; blackened by flame.

Where homes had stood in peaceful quietude, now only a few charred skeletons still smouldered. Where ancient oaks had drowsed, and gardens blossomed gaily before lovely dwellings, now flowered only the crimson tongue of fire, licking hungrily at such scant sustenance as still withstood its ravages.

Vinton, suburb of Roanoke which had once housed four thousand souls, was one vast, smoke-stifled plain, razed to the earth like Carthage of old. And across that flat horizon, barely visible through sifting clouds of smoke, could be seen a glowing light. A gigantic hoop of iridescence, a circle of venous flame, its nether boundary tangent to the ground. And in this ring Kerry glimpsed motion. Movement as of a constant stream of motes spilling from a bowl of light.

He turned to Lynn. "Is that—"

She nodded. "Yes. That is the Gateway out of which the invaders are marching."

Kerry cried excitedly, "But that thing makes a *huge* target! It must be vulnerable. A fleet of bombers would make hash of it in jigtime!"

"That," growled Youse, "is what you think! Yesterday that flat black field before us was overspread with the buildings of the Viscose Corporation, one of the biggest manufacturing concerns in southwest Virginia. There's nothing left of it now but ashes. You haven't seen the invaders' weapon. A sort of crystal disc which emits white-hot waves of radiation that instantly scorch to oblivion anything they touch. Anything! Metal, stone, wood—it doesn't seem to matter."

Kerry remembered, then, the solitary Army plane he had seen fly toward the Gateway, and the brief, coruscating spark that plane had made in the sky.

"Nevertheless," he said doggedly, "there's never yet been a weapon invented that man couldn't invent a defense against. Perhaps stratosphere planes . . . Flying Fortresses. . . ."

Youse nodded grudging agreement. "Maybe you've got something there, Shane. But it's not doing us any good to stand here plotting tactics. Our job is to get out of here with whole hides, get to the War Department. Maybe our information will be some help to them. No! Not that way."

He stopped Buck as the cameraman-flyer started down the main road. "The last we heard from the broadcasting station, the invaders had swept past the Hotel Roanoke and into the down-

town sector. If that's the truth, they'll have cut off Jefferson Street by now. No use going that way."

O'Connor said, "But my plane's down there! In the stadium!"

"Then you've lost a plane," Youse told him bluntly. "No, our only chance is to sneak south out of town. Through Yellow Mountain Road. This way!"

And he took the lead, striking off the paved roadway into bridle paths so long unused that they were overgrown with weeds and brambles. If anything, that descent of Mill Mountain was more arduous than had been the climb up the shuttle-back, because there were four of them now, and sometimes the course they were forced to choose was no true pathway at all, but a mere opening in the tangle of foliage.

But they made it, finally, to the thoroughfare Bob had decided on. And over this they hurried.

"To Prospect Hills," said Youse. "If we can reach there, we'll find an auto. Friend of mine."

"Probably left town," grunted O'Connor, "like everybody else."

Youse grinned. "Not this guy!" he chuckled. "He's a science-fiction fan from 'way back. He's been reading and writing about just such things as this invasion for years. You couldn't *drive* him out of town while this is going on. Hey! Here's a break! A lift! I hear a car coming!"

It was true. The hum of an automobile motor neared. Youse stepped into the middle of the road, waving desperately at the sedan swinging around a bend.

"Hey, chum! Wait a minute! Take us along."

And the car braked to a stop. The quartet raced forward eagerly, but for only a few steps. Because suddenly the car's door swung open and figures burst from the interior. The first of those who stepped from the car was one at sight of whom a chill of despair settled upon Kerry Shane's heart. A tall and hard-eyed figure, now not garbed in quiet serge, as Kerry had always seen him before, but in a strange, outlandish costume—a sort of uniform, at the belt of which dangled weapons unfamiliar to earthly eyes.

It was Lynn Gregory who cried aloud the man's name.

"Dr. Nestor!"

CHAPTER V

The Dying World

It was altogether likely that Lynn Gregory's cry of recognition was the only thing which saved the fleeing foursome from imme-

diate death, as already the other occupants of the automobile had drawn from their belts such crystal discs as Youse and Lynn had warned of.

But at the sound of the girl's voice, the man whom Lynn and Kerry had known as "Dr. Nestor" started, and a cry broke from his lips, a word of command in a strange, guttural tongue. Though his companions still held their weapons poised and ready, no lashing tongue of flame was loosed.

Now "Dr. Nestor" stepped forward, his tone a strange commingling of surprise, triumphant pleasure and curiosity.

"Miss Gregory. What are you doing here?"

It was Kerry who answered, moving to confront the man boldly.

"We might ask the same of you, Nestor. Except that we know the answer already. You're one of *those* devils, aren't you?"

"Who—" The tall man peered at him sharply, nodded recognition. "Ah—the young newspaperman, eh? You Earthmen surprise me. I had believed you were many miles away in your city of Philadelphia."

Buck O'Conner, completely bewildered, stared from one to another of his friends. "I don't get it!" he said flatly. "You *know* this guy? But—but he's one of Them, ain't he?"

"He is," gritted Kerry. "We knew him as Dr. Nestor, a European scientist. But he's the one who stole the condenser from Lynn's father, and attacked the old man from behind. You'll pay for that, Nestor!"

Nestor permitted himself a faint, derisive smile.

"I should say, my hotheaded young friend," he commented, "that you are hardly in a position to proffer threats. I would, if I were you, be a bit more discreet in antagonizing a Kohrlan of the ruling race."

"Ruling race!" gasped Lynn defiantly. "Race of vandals—that's what you mean! Murderers, if they are all like you, Dr. Nestor. Oh, yes—I understand everything now. You see, Kerry"—she wheeled to Shane swiftly—"Nestor is the 'phantom fiend' I've been seeking for so many weeks. It was he who killed that Mulligan chap in Kensington the night you and I covered the story, he who murdered that poor newsboy in Bala, the night-watchman at the United Metals plant—a dozen other innocent people! To further his own vile ends."

A flush darkened Nestor's high cheekbones. He turned to his followers. "Disarm them. Put them in the car. We will take them with us." To Lynn he said, frowning, "Like this young man, you

wag an impetuous tongue, Miss Gregory. I shall take measures to correct that."

It was not to Kerry's liking that he stand by helplessly and allow himself to be stripped of his sidearms, herded into the automobile. But discretion, which sage adage rightly advised to be the "better part of valor," warned him that this was no time for foolhardy opposition. He and his companions were hopelessly outnumbered, not to mention out-weaponed. It was miracle enough that they were being taken into custody unharmed. There was no sense in further tempting fate. Their hour might come later.

Their journey was not a long one. They were taken in the direction opposite that which they had intended. Back along Yellow Mountain Road toward the city, then up a winding lane to a massive brick structure which Bob Youse named for them.

"The Roanoke Hospital," he said. Then, as they were prodded into the building to find its once-hushed corridors athrong with a host of bustling other-world warriors dressed like Nestor: "But I don't understand. The patients . . . the hospital staff! Where are they?"

Their captor overheard his query. "They are gone," he said. "We could not permit so ideal a spot for our headquarters to be cluttered up with mewling invalids. This building is admirably located for our purposes."

"Gone?" repeated the radioman dazedly. "Where? How? There weren't enough ambulances in Roanoke to take them all away."

The false scientist stared at him with something akin to commiseration in his eyes.

"My dear fellow," he said suavely, "are all you Earthmen so naively tenderhearted? Surely you understand the futility of wasting care and food upon diseased and helpless creatures? The patients of this institution were of no use to us as servants. They were therefore eliminated."

"Eliminated!" Youse turned scarlet with rage.

Buck O'Connor looked suddenly, dangerously, pallid. A little cry broke from Lynn's lips, and she began weeping softly. Kerry took up the challenge.

"Eliminated? You mean slaughtered? Nestor, you're a mad dog!"

"Enough!" interrupted the tall man abruptly. "Your stupidity annoys me!"

They had reached the administrator's office now, and Kerry saw that it had been gutted of its files, its medical paraphernalia,

and had been converted into the field office of a highly efficient army. Dr. Nestor turned to his lieutenants, dismissed them.

"You may go now. I can take care of these creatures. Phrensos, see that a radiophone apparatus is installed here as soon as possible. Kurj, see that I am advised when the last opposing forces have been destroyed. Rhansul, take two detachments and institute an immediate search for the vital element!"

Then, as his aides left, he returned his attention to his captives almost amicably.

"As you see, all operations are proceeding according to expectation. Let me bid you, therefore, rest quietly and resign yourselves to acceptance of the New Order. There is no reason, for further strife between our peoples. Frankly, there are many things I admire about you Earthlings. Backward and soft as you may be, I find you a most amusing race."

Kerry asked stonily, "How did you get here so quickly, Nestor? At noon you were in Philadelphia. I know there were no airplanes available."

The man from beyond smiled gently. "I came through my own world, Shane. I shall explain in a moment. But before I begin, may I request that you do not call me 'Nestor'? My name is Nisthru, Kohrlan of Meropes. I adopted the less pronounceable name because it resembled one in your own barbaric tongue.

"Having overheard your radio broadcasts, I understand you have some knowledge of the world from which I come." Here he made a slight bow to Lynn. "Your father is an intelligent man, Miss Gregory. He will be granted special privileges when our conquest of Earth is complete. He grasped very quickly a difficult concept."

"You mean he was right?" Youse demanded. "Your universe is parallel to this one?"

"Exactly. I might even go so far as to say that your Earth and Meropes—my world—are sister planets. We exist side-by-side, though on different vibrational harmonics, in a matrix universe which is composed of solid matter.

"I am amused to learn that your physicists and astronomers have for centuries sought an explanation of what they blindly call the 'ether'. Actually, my friends, there is no such thing as interplanetary vacuum. That which looks to you like 'empty space' is, as Dr. Gregory brilliantly deduced too late, filled to the last tiny crevice with other fragments of matter invisible to mankind because they are on a different plane.

"Thus, you see, space is completely solid. As an Earthman sci-

entist profoundly said centuries ago, 'Nature abhors a vacuum.' ”

Kerry, having already discussed this question with Dr. Gregory, had some inkling of what Nestor—or Nisthru—was driving at. So did Lynn. But it was apparent that their captor's arguments only furthered the confusion of Youse and O'Connor.

“But, wait a minute, fellow!” objected O'Connor. “What do you mean—no empty space? We can *see* it! How about the nothingness which stretches between us and the Sun, the stars?”

Nisthru shrugged.

“Emptiness as far as you are concerned, my dear chap. And, I might add, perhaps even emptiness in *my* universe as far as we Meropians are concerned. But by adding together all the multitudinous universes of which yours and mine are but two, investigation will discover this seeming 'void' to be filled with matter.

“Long ago we Meropians discovered this great secret. Many years ago we realized that light, heat, electricity, energy, could not by their very natures traverse wide expanses of mere 'nothingness' or vacuum—and from this starting point deduced the true situation.

“Curiosity impelled us to seek further into this matter. Lately our research was hastened by a more vital urge. And a short while back we succeeded in inventing the Gateway, the vibro-harmonic transformer which permits transit between our universe and others.

“Yours, I might add, is not the first of the neighboring worlds we have visited. Scouts like myself entered into and studied parallel universes the very descriptions of which would appal you.

“One there was in which no mother Sun existed; that was a bleak, desolate place. In another, that planet which corresponds to your Earth, our Meropes, was still in the Age of Reptiles. Once the Gateway opened horribly into a universe wherein the locum of Earth was filled by a huge ball of flame. A frightful catastrophe. One of our mightiest laboratories was destroyed before we could close the Gateway.”

Nisthru shuddered at the recollection.

“You—you mean that in all these universes there is a set-up somehow similar to that which our astronomers know?” Kerry said dazedly. “A Sun . . . planets . . . a galactic universe . . . far stars?”

“But of course. Many are the variations Nature plays on its fundamental theme, but the *leit-motif* does not change. For the total universe in which we live is always the same, mechanistic balance of bodies, powers and forces. My home-world of Meropes, for instance, is strikingly similar to this one.

"Its diameter is approximately eighty-five hundred miles, as compared to the seventy-nine hundred of Earth; its volume and mass are slightly greater than Earth's; the distance to our Sun is one hundred and three million miles, whereas you lie less than ninety-six million miles from yours. But, by and large, your world resembles ours very closely. So favorably, indeed, that yours is the one we have selected to make our new home."

"Make your new home?"

Nisthru nodded.

"Yes, Shane. Unhappily, our Sun is older than that which lights Earth. It is dying, dwindling into the 'dwarf-star' stage. Our astronomers estimate that within less than another decade it will no longer supply Meropes with enough warmth to sustain life. We have desperately sought the secret of space-travel—and failed to find it. There is only one other avenue of escape—into this neighboring world."

"And mankind?" blazed Lynn suddenly. "What are your plans for the hundreds of millions of humans who now populate Earth?"

"There is room," said Nisthru loftily, "for all. Naturally, there must be a readjustment of rulership. As the more intellectual, the more advanced race, we will assume a protectorate of Earth and its inhabitants. But you will find us benevolent masters. Those of you who meet our standards will be lifted from serfdom into posts of minor authority. Who knows but that centuries hence our two races may even meet on an almost equal footing?"

The quartet of Earthlings listened to this condescending speech with mounting rage. Now the radio announcer could no longer restrain himself.

"Equal footing!" he bellowed. "Benevolent masters? Why, confound you, Nisthru—you've already shown what rulers you would make! Scum who would ruthlessly destroy a whole village of innocent people and murder the helpless patients of a hospital."

The Meropian slipped the crystal disc from his belt, halting the ox-gridstar's forward motion. There was cool, unimpassioned menace in the way he fingered the weapon. But he merely smiled again.

"Those measures," he said negligently, "were a little stringent perhaps, but necessary. Naturally, we must meet force with force, impressing upon our foes at the outset the futility of resistance. Our warfare is purely defensive."

"We've heard that argument before from the lips of one of our own mad dogs," Lynn cried. "You blind fool! Don't you realize

that if you had come to the scientists of our world, told them of your plight, all Earth would have sprung to your assistance? Offered you freely and wholeheartedly a haven of refuge from your dying world?

"But now you've alienated mankind with your brutality. You claim intelligence, Nisthru, but you've made a fatal mistake in your judgment of mankind. There's not a man alive who will meekly bow to your New Order. By the time you take Earth—if you take Earth—you will be heir to a scorched ruin!"

But again Nisthru's only response was an amused smile.

"And you, Miss Gregory," he said softly, "underestimate our powers. Consider! Three short weeks ago I stepped through the Gateway into this world, a single, poorly armed stranger, ignorant of your Earth, your cities and customs, your very tongue. I came to blaze the trail for my brothers. Today we have a foothold on your world! Tomorrow"—there was a gleam of triumph in his eye—"Tomorrow it is *ours!*"

Again his glance softened into one of pleased anticipation. "Your race will not be without a part in the remodeling of the future world. One thing I have found here delights me strongly, Miss Gregory. Women, strong women like yourself."

"Wh-what?" Lynn's brow congealed. "I don't understand."

"Meropes is a man's world," continued Nisthru casually. "Our women are poor, weak, spiritless creatures. Without fire and vitality, without color. Our proud blood needs the strengthening of such women as yourself, Lynn Gregory. And I, Nisthru, Kohrlan of Meropes, shall inaugurate the movement which will people Earth with a great and powerful new race!

"And you—because you please me, Lynn Gregory—you shall be granted the honor of raising the human race to greater heights. You and I shall be the first to give Earth strong, new children."

It was the last straw. Kerry's nerves had been aflame with the tension of listening to this madman's haughty boasts, his blood had been boiling with suppressed violence ever since their capture. Yet he had held himself in check, waiting for a favorable opportunity to arise. Now, however, he could hold himself back no longer.

Rage churned up within him, seething, gripping him in a maelstrom of fury. Hammers of anger pounded at his temple, his voice was like the thick, choking snarl of some savage beast.

"You!" he croaked incoherently. And he plunged forward, smashing at the taunting face before him like a rogue elephant gone *musth*.

He was conscious that his movement had been the trap releas-

ing the two men who were his companions. At his side O'Connor struck forward, bellowing.

The radioman, Bob Youse, promptly joined his cause to theirs. Then Kerry's hands met and tightened about the Kohrlan's throat, and a savage exultation welled up within him. Superior being or not, Nisthru was flesh and blood! Kerry's fists tightened.

"Kerry, the disc! Look out!" screamed Lynn.

In the fraction of time that remained to him, he saw that though Nisthru tottered and fell, though his features were livid with sudden fear, the Kohrlan of Meropes still clenched the crystal disc. Now he leveled it upon the attacking trio.

A light, brain-searingly intense, smashed Kerry like a ponderous fist. His very skull seemed to expand and explode in a tremendous roar. His knees crumpled beneath him, and his weakening fingers fell from Nisthru's throat.

A sudden black abyss opened beneath him, a vast gulf of frozen flame into which he plunged headlong and helpless.

After that—nothing.

CHAPTER VI

The Dungeons of Meropes

Out of the darkness and the silence, a tiny whisper of sound, a vague and swirling veil of light. Out of oblivion, awareness. Out of death, life.

Kerry Shane opened his eyes. And, as he did so, words eddied to him out of the droning hubbub that had throbbed a million miles away. Words in the familiar voice of O'Connor.

"He's coming to. Lift his head, Youse. Here, keed, take a sip of this."

Water, rank and slimy and malodorous, spilled against his lips. Kerry drank, choked, gagged on the evil-tasting stuff. He pushed it away and raised himself on one elbow.

"Wh—where am I? Wh—what happened?"

"Easy, guy!" warned O'Connor. "Feel okay to get up? Lean on my shoulder—there, that's it. Where are we?" There was a rueful note in the cameraman's voice. "Why, if we were back on Earth, I'd say it was the Black Hole of Calcutta, or maybe Byron's famous Prison of Chillon. Anyhow, it's a good Meropian imitation of those hell-holes."

Kerry, his strength returning to him swiftly, gazed about him. Buck had not exaggerated the ugliness of the dungeons wherein they were confined. They stood in one of a series of tremendous, cavernlike rooms so lofty, so stalwart, that they might have been

shewn of solid rock. Beneath their feet was sweating stone, worn slippery-smooth by the fretful tramp of countless pacing feet.

The high-arched roof was supported by mighty columns a man could not span. Set into these columns were mighty bolts from which dangled ancient, rusted chains. The floor was littered with filth, the accumulated detritus of ages, and the air was foul. It was not hard to guess why. The only ventilation, as well as the only feeble illumination, came from one tiny window set high on a far wall.

Nor were they alone in these musty quarters. Kerry, as his eyes accustomed themselves to the gloom, saw that gray figures lurked about himself and his companions, staring at them curiously out of gaunt, hollow-socketed eyes. Two score of these specters there must have been. Perhaps more, for as he looked, more ragged wraiths appeared from some far corner of the dungeons.

"Thank the Lord," said Bob Youse, "you're all right, Shane. We thought it was taps for you when that Nisthru guy let you have it with the disc. But apparently he'd exhausted most of its charge on women and kids." There was vitriol in the radioman's voice. "It only had force enough to knock you cold. After that, His Nibs took the four of us to the circle—the Gateway—and ferried us into this world. And here we three men are!"

A swift alarm gripped Kerry.

"Lynn?" he demanded.

O'Connor shook his head. "We don't know, keed. The big shot took her away with him after he chucked us in here." He turned impatiently, angrily, to the ever-narrowing circle of listeners. "What the devil do you think this is—a freak show? G'wan, beat it!"

But one stepped forward from the group, an older man in whose eyes was no enmity, only a pleading hopefulness. He said falteringly, "We—okay."

Youse's eyes bulged. He gulped, "H-hey, get a load of that! The old duck talks English!"

And their accoster picked up the words eagerly. "I talks English. You thought—I talks. You talks!"

"Double-talk!" gasped O'Connor. "Of all places."

But Kerry stopped him swiftly. "Wait a minute, Buck. I think I understand. Old man, you mean that if we just talk to you in our language you'll be able to pick up the tongue, is that it? A sort of mental telepathy or something?"

The aged prisoner smiled and nodded eagerly. "Talk. I mental telepathy you language."

Kerry turned to his friends. "Now I understand how Nisthru managed to get along so well on Earth. These Meropians appar-

ently are able to discern the meaning of a word when they hear it used in a sentence. After that, they can use it themselves. Well, come on! Let's give the old man what he wants. Talk up!"

"About what?" wailed O'Connor.

"About anything. Everything. The more words we use, the greater vocabulary they'll build up." Kerry started the ball rolling by pointing at himself. "I am a man. I come from the planet Earth, which exists adjacent to Meropes but on a different vibrational plane. These are my friends. Our names are Kerry Shane, Buck O'Connor, Bob Youse."

So began the weirdest linguistic lesson it had ever been the lot of a human to mete out. But it was successful beyond Kerry Shane's wildest imaginings. A braggart the Kohrlan Nisthru might be, but he had told the truth about one thing—the intelligence of the Meropians.

A respect which was almost humility filled Kerry when, after an hour of haphazard talk, the old man and those who flanked him were able to converse in the English tongue with the Earthmen, faltering only when they were at a loss for a word. And once a basis for understanding had been achieved, it was the Meropian who led the course of conversation.

"My name," he told them, "is Phaedru. I am—or once was—a Kohrlan of Meropes—"

He got no further. At the hated word, Youse snarled savagely, "Oh, one of Nisthru's buddies, eh? What is this? A trap of some kind?"

But the anger flashing from the older man's eyes at the sound of Nisthru's name was answer enough.

"I am no friend of Nisthru's, Earthman. A 'Kohrlan' is one of the twelve elected rulers of this world. In happier times, all Kohrlani had an equal voice in our government. But today a great disaster has befallen our people. We are ruled by a single, evil, ruthless man.

"And that is perhaps my fault more than any other's, for as senior Kohrlan I should have seen the shadow of change falling upon us. But I was blind to Nisthru's designs. And bitterly have I paid for my blindness. I do not seek to excuse myself, but a great catastrophe threatens our world, and so deeply was I concerned with finding some way of forestalling this—"

"You mean your dying sun?" Kerry interrupted.

Phaedru looked surprised.

"Ah, then you know? Yes, it was that which preoccupied me so that I had no eyes for Nisthru's scheming. I did not realize until

too late that he was assuming unto himself ever more and more power. I lent a deaf ear to rumors which hinted at a force of armed mercenaries from the wild outlands of Meropes. This, to my mind, was impossible. For we are a peaceful race, we Meropians, and long ago the Kohrlan Council outlawed all warfare.

"Thus it came as a shocking blow, Nisthru's *coup*. A signal . . . a single bloody night . . . and his purpose was accomplished. Of the twelve Kohrlani, only Nisthru and myself still live. The others were foully murdered. In my despair, I begged Nisthru that I be allowed to join them in clean death, but he refused me even this. Someday, he laughed, he might find a use for me."

"But" demanded Kerry, "the common people of Meropes? If, as you say, they are a peaceful race, why did they permit Nisthru to gain the whip hand? Surely an uprising—"

"With what, my friend?" asked Phaedru sadly. "I have told you our Council outlawed warfare. The good and honest men of Meropes had no weapons. They did rise against Nisthru, cried out against him in the streets. But his gutter-gathered minions, armed with the disc Nisthru invented—for he *is* a brilliant man, evil though he be—scattered the outraged mob to the four winds. Since that time, Nisthru has reigned unchallenged.

"You have told me that now Nisthru is invading your world to make your people also tributary to his mad ambitions. Believe me, man of Earth"—there was a note of pleading in Phaedru's voice—"the great mass of the Meropian people are not his allies in this plot. Had we the power, we would show our good faith by helping you stave off his attack."

Kerry stared at the deposed Kohrlan thoughtfully for a long moment. Intuitively he knew that the old man told the truth.

"Then," he said with firm determination, "it's time we were putting our thinking caps on. Nisthru must be stopped, but we can't stop him while we're caged up in here like so many white mice. If there are willing hands waiting to join us outside we may be able to do something."

"There are," Phaedru assured him. "The city of Thaal, which surrounds us, numbers thirty thousand souls, everyone loyal to the old regime I represent. The very citadel in which we are imprisoned is an arsenal that could sustain an army of freedom for days. But"—he shrugged hopelessly—"what use are these men, these arms, to us? The walls that bind us are thick and strong, my friend."

"'Stone walls' " quoted Kerry sententiously, "'do not a prison make.' "

"Maybe not," grunted Youse, "but they make an excellent fac-

simile." He, too, was staring about him eagerly. "Hey! How about that window? It's high, but not *too* high. I think I could make it with a good jump. I'm sure I could make it with a boost."

He started toward the tiny oblong. But Phaedru cried warningly, "No! Have a care! Those bars."

"I see them. But that's just it. This joint's old. They may be rusted in their sockets."

"Look at them again, my friend. And carefully. You must not have noticed the way those 'bars' are placed before the opening."

Youse, who had been on the verge of attempting an experimental leap, stopped just in time. Now, studying the way the window was barred, some of the color left his cheeks. For it was only foreshortening from the ground level that made it seem the window was laced with uprights. Actually, the bars were razor-edged spikes, jutting from the lower window ledge at an angle to catch and horribly impale the body of any who leaped for the opening.

Youse turned away, shuddering. "Nevertheless," he said, "if we formed a pyramid, with a little care a man might be able to get past those bars."

"But to no avail," finished Phaedru. "That window opens on a sheer wall, a drop of a hundred feet to the stone courtyard below. This citadel, you see, is built on a cliff."

"But there must be *some* way of getting out of here!" Kerry blazed tautly. "Even if we have to attack the guard. Say!" A sudden thought struck him. "When they feed us! That's the time to jump them."

But again the Kohrlan shook his head.

"Were the solution so easy, my friend, we should long ago have found it. No guard enters these dungeons to feed us. Our food is shoved through a trap, also the filth they give us for drink. No, death is the only release from this prison."

The word struck Kerry like a blow. His eyes widened.

"Death! Of course! Phaedru, that's it! Don't they remove the bodies of the dead?"

"Yes, of course, but—"

"Then if we were to stage a mock battle between you Meropians and us Earthmen the clamor would attract the attention of the guard, wouldn't it?"

The old man's eyes awakened to new life.

"Maybe," he whispered. "Just possibly it would work! Yes, I think it would! Because Nisthru has issued strict orders that I am

to be kept alive. And you three are also important prisoners. The guard would certainly enter to stop the fight."

A man of action, now, he turned to his ragtag group of followers. "Scatter to the deepest recesses of the dungeons. Find all our men, all whom we can trust, all who are ready to strike for freedom! Bring them here!"

And to Kerry: "We will not be many, man of Earth, Four-score at the most. But if Nisthru has, as you say, poured all his army into the other world, the defenses of Thaal may have been weakened. And hope is not yet dead!"

CHAPTER VII

Counterattack

Thus it was that half an hour later, as almost eighty ragged and half-starved skeletons gathered grimly in the central chamber within sight of the massive bronze door which was the dungeon's only outlet, the leaders of this desperate bid for freedom whispered their final plans.

"I have been considering the matter more carefully," said Phaedru. "A brawl might bring the guard in to quell it. But on the other hand, he might go back to bring a company of his fellows. Our ruse must be such that he is spurred into a hasty and unconsidered action. Only one thing I can think of might achieve that result—imminent peril to *myself*! It must be upon me, then, that you make violent attack. And make it realistic!"

"And if we lure him in?" husked one of the Meropians.

Kerry nodded toward Buck O'Connor, who had already assumed his post of concealment beside the bronze doorway.

"Buck will grab him. Ready, Buck?"

O'Connor's eyes narrowed. "Ready, willing and able. I guess I won't be needing this, though. Here, Youse. Here's something to whack enemy pates with when we get outside."

He had torn from its loosened socket a length of rusty chain; now he chucked this toward the other man. Youse snatched for it, missed. Buck chuckled.

"Same old butterfingers! Same as you fumbled that Rose Bowl pass!"

Youse, flushing, retrieved the chain from the floor. One final glance about, and Kerry gave the signal.

"*Now!*"

Instantly bedlam broke loose in the dungeon. It was the more effective because the high vaulted roof of the chambers picked

up the sound, intensified it, augmented it a hundredfold. Voices lifted in cries of pretended rage, roars of hatred and screams of simulated pain. Chains made a metallic clamor as their possessors wielded them. Above all bellowed the wrathful voice of Phaedru.

"So, filth of another world, you would mock a Kohrlan of the chosen race? You shall suffer for your impudence!"

But even as he shouted, his eyes sought the doorway. And from that vantage point Buck O'Connor nodded and motioned with one hand, a motion signifying as clearly as if he had spoken the words that their subterfuge had gained its desired result. The prison guard had heard the commotion and was approaching.

Kerry would have thought it impossible that the noise echoing and re-echoing through the chambers could increase, but it doubled in volume at this encouraging sign. There was the scrape of a bolted grate being drawn back in its slide as the guard peered through his peephole to see what was going on.

It was at this moment the prepared tableau slipped into its most convincing scene. The host of Meropians, headed by Phaedru, burst forward upon Kerry and Youse like an angry wave.

Kerry, remembering the old Kohrlan's admonition, did not pull his punches. He let fly to right and left about him, and mingled with the false howls and screams were several honestly shocked grunts from those who felt the force of his blows.

Youse, too, was in his element. Defiance blazing in his eyes, he exuberantly picked one spindling prisoner up and flung him bodily at the advancing horde, toppling the group like tenpins. And in the mêlée, somehow Phaedru's lips found Kerry's ear.

"He cries in the Meropian tongue for us to stop!" the Kohrlan whispered swiftly. "But do not!"

With the shout of the guard ringing loudly in their ears, they played their final, tempting act. Kerry clutched Phaedru to him, fought his way clear of the mob and to a spot where he was clearly visible to the watcher. His words rang out loud and strong.

"Hold, dogs of Meropes! Another forward step and your Kohrlan dies!"

One bronzed arm, from which the shirtsleeve whipped in tatters, was hooked about the old man's throat. Kerry's biceps tensed, and Phaedru's choked gasp was not altogether thespian. Right hand gripping a sturdy staple, Kerry lifted high his free arm. For an instant everything froze. Straining bodies held in mid-motion as if stayed by a gigantic wall. The tumult was gripped in sudden silence.

And through that silence came that for which all had gambled!

The hoarse shouts of the frantic guard, and the dry grate of metal against metal as a key turned in the lock and the great bronze door swung open!

"*Get him, Buck!*"

Kerry scarcely knew that the cry ripped from his own throat. But the command was wasted breath. O'Connor knew his job and was ready for it. Like a striking cobra he broke from the elbow of the door, his strong arms encircled the guard, binding him in steely embrace. The warden loosed one brief, startled cry before Buck's red fist gagged him.

It was only a whim of the fickle Fates that at that moment, when triumph beckoned brightly, the enthusiasm of their own men should have betrayed them. For like a flood unleashed, the Meropians abandoned their mock battle to aid against the real enemy.

Like terriers baiting a bull, they swarmed down upon the writhing pair. Sheer weight of numbers separated O'Connor from his captive, and a mad scramble ensued in which friend lashed out at friend and the prize wriggled free! Before Kerry could even comprehend this sudden, disastrous change of events the guard was on his feet again, clear of the tangle, his crystal disc facing the conspirators!

Now, his voice thick with fury, he rasped something to Phaedru, while the thwarted Meropians stood motionless in a paralysis of despair. Phaedru interpreted swiftly for the Earthmen.

"If a single one of us moves, he will sweep the room with flame. We will be punished for this, he says."

But Kenny saw one thing that gave him a feeble glint of hope. The bronze doorway had swung to with a *snick!* and was now, again, securely locked. Obviously it operated on a spring-latch. To get out of the room, the guard would have to relax his watchfulness for at least one split second while he fitted the key to its lock.

He tensed himself for the move that might be their last chance. The guard was retreating step by step toward the door. Now his hand felt behind him . . . he slipped a huge key-ring from his belt . . . his disc wavered . . . his eye faltered.

And Kerry moved! He had no chance to cover the distance between himself and his quarry. But he held in his upraised right hand the iron staple with which he had menaced Phaedru. With a lunge and a prayer he hurled it straight at the guard!

The Meropian screamed with pain! But his shout did not drown out an even more welcome sound: the tinkle of the crystal disc flying from his broken hand to shatter upon the floor!

This time there was no escape for the warder and he knew it. Already his erstwhile prisoners were leaping toward him. His weapon was gone; his life forfeit. But he had one last trump to play. Foe he might be, but according to his own lights he was a courageous man. And bravely he tried, even in this extremity, to halt the uprising. With no time left to flee the room, he lifted the key above his head—and threw it!

Kerry saw, with a burst of horror, his desperate intention. Without that precious key none could get through the locked door. And it was winging straight and true toward the tiny window on the side wall, the window which opened on a courtyard a hundred feet below!

Kerry was helpless to prevent this disaster. The only prisoner who was anywhere near that window was the tall, ex-grid star, Bob Youse. His mind trained by athletic competition to swift decision, Youse saw what must be done. His body, kept lean and hard even through soft years in a workaday world, was capable of a last, glorious effort.

With a frantic burst of speed he raced three steps to the wall, found a toehold on its rough stones and leaped! His groping hand strained high, taut fingers clenched for a whirling hoop, gripped . . . *held* the key-ring!

Then the impetus of his drive smashed him against the wall and into the barbs that rimmed the window-ledge! For an instant there was the sickening sound of flesh tearing like old and rotten cloth, a muted cry. Then the radioman dropped to the floor suddenly.

In a flash, Kerry was at the ex-athlete's side. He did not even witness the awful retribution wreaked upon their guard by those who engulfed him. He saw only a swiftly paling face that tried to smile, and blue eyes clouding coldly. At his side were Buck O'Connor and Phaedru. The Meropian would have lifted Youse, but the announcer shook his head.

"No use—chum," he gasped. "I'm pretty much . . . of a . . . mess." His eyes, rolling, sought those of Buck O'Connor. He whispered feebly, "But that's one pass . . . I didn't fumble . . . anyway." Then a violent shudder passed through him.

That was all.

Kerry came to his feet completely unaware, entirely unashamed of the fact that there were tears in his eyes. No tears of weakness these. The set of his jaw boded no good to any man, beast or devil who now stood in the way of his vengeance. And his

voice, lifting in command, was like the rasp of a file.

"Here is our liberty!" he cried, holding aloft the key-ring. "Purchased in blood by a brave man. Shall we lose it again?"

A throaty roar, like the rumble of thundering drums, was his answer. Skeletons his followers might be, but they were eighty-odd strong, and keyed to a pitch of frenzy. Like a lean wolfpack they followed Kerry to the door.

It was ironic, in a way, but it was only just that the whimsical Fates should this time be their ally. For however great their determination, their foray would have been doomed to swift disaster had they encountered one enemy warrior in their present unarmed state. But they did not!

Into the corridor they surged, and past the cubicle which was the warder's quarters. No voice raised to question them, no hand lifted to stay their passage. Up a flight of stairs, debouching into a higher level of the citadel, into a well-lighted passageway they surged.

Here Phaedru, spying symbols in the Meropian tongue printed on a chamber door, cried aloud his triumph.

"A store-room! The arsenal of the citadel! Now we have won indeed, Kerry Shane!"

After that it was unimportant that they finally met a soldier of Thaal's depleted guard. The fellow had only time to gasp his surprise before he died, charred to a crisp by a dozen beams. For the vanquished were a vanguard now; the conquered were the conquerors.

Kerry left a half-dozen men behind to guard the arsenal. The others he split into detachments of twenty, each headed by one whose leadership abilities Phaedru recommended. From their central base, these branched off into various sectors of the gigantic citadel which was—thought Kerry, interpreting the city in terms of Earthly geography—Kraal's Kremlin. Their instructions were simple.

"Destroy on sight," Kerry ordered uncompromisingly, "all Nisthru's men who do not immediately surrender. I know it's brutal, but war is a brutal business. Kraal must harbor none who would rise against us.

"When the citadel has been swept clean of all foes, go out into the city and bring to us all Meropians who would fight for our cause. Kohrlan, you have means of making public announcements? Similar to our Earth's radio, I mean?"

"Not only similar," smiled the reinstated Kohrlan. "Identical. With a few refinements your science has not yet discovered. It was

through the ultra-wave, you know, that we learned of your world. Once the citadel is completely in our hands, we will address the citizens of Kraal and rally them to our banner."

"Meanwhile," said Kerry grimly, "I've urgent private business of my own. Lynn. Where did Nisthru take her?"

Phaedru pondered briefly. Then: "Undoubtedly," he said, "to his own quarters. But would it not be wiser to leave the storming of that part of the citadel to some of our men, Kerry? If any sector is organized for defense, *it* will be. We dare not risk losing you. You are too important to our cause."

But on this point Kerry was unyielding. "This is *my* job, Phaedru. Give me a detachment and show the way. And I only hope Nisthru is there."

His hope was not granted. The nest was where Phaedru had guessed, and swarming with rats as the Kohrlan feared. But they were surprised rats. Their first intimation of danger was a withering burst of flame that swept their number with the sickle of death as Kerry's men, surrounding their headquarters, caught them lolling at their ease and listening to a raucous instrument somewhat similar in form to an Earth radio.

Those who survived were offered a chance to surrender. Some few laid down their arms, but most, fearing the kind of mercy they would have granted prisoners of their own, chose to fight it out. Kerry was never afterward to remember more than fragments of that battle; his mind's eye rebelled at retaining an imperishable souvenir of such a scene.

For the fight could not be waged with the crystal discs. As the warriors of both aides knew, the power of the radiation was too great. It not only destroyed human flesh; if turned to full power it razed wood and stone and metal as well. No fighter on either side dared use the full strength of his weapon. To do so might have brought the entire edifice toppling down upon friend and foe alike.

In an extremity, as a desperation measure, even this might not have been too great a violence for the followers of Nisthru, but none ever got the chance. For the struggle developed swiftly into hand-to-hand combat with steel, tooth and claw. And here the Meropian patriots held the advantage. Their adversaries fought only for their lives. The Kerry men fought for not only life, but their homes, their beloved ones, their liberty as well.

To such a struggle there could be but one end. At last, with the chamber strewn with the bodies of dead and dying, it was over. The defeated Nisthrumen threw down their swords and pleaded for amnesty. While the remnants of his force took their surviving

foes into grim custody, Kerry shouldered past the barrier behind which waited Lynn.

Curiously enough, it was at this moment of triumph he most nearly met disaster. For when he burst into the room it was only a half-heard sound, a warning sense of peril, that caused him to drop suddenly to the floor. And his intuitive reflex had not been without justification. For as he did so, singing death *whirred!* savagely past his head, and a gleaming blade buried itself inches deep in the planking behind him to quiver there horribly!

Then Lynn was racing toward him, calling fearfully, "Kerry! Oh, Kerry, I had no idea. I thought it was Nestor returning. Speak to me, my dear!"

Kerry rose, shaken but smiling.

"It's all right. I'm okay. But listen, sugar, you ought to be more careful where you chuck those things. I'm allergic to knives. Or didn't you know?"

She stared at him fearfully. "Where did you escape from, Kerry? How did you get here? You must let me hide you quickly before the guards come and find you."

"Easy does it. There's no rush. Everything's under control." Kerry grinned. "The Marines have landed, and the situation is well in hand. We're top dogs around here now, Lynn. We've gained a foothold in Nisthru's back yard, and now we've got him just where we want him!"

A little cry burst from her lips, a cry which was at once glad and sad.

"I'm afraid it's too late, Kerry! I've been listening to the radio. Nisthru's armies are victorious everywhere. Washington has fallen . . . the government has fled . . . and he holds America in the palm of his hand!"

CHAPTER VIII

Wanted: Power

"So," said Buck O'Connor gloomily, "we're right back where we started from, only more so. We win, but we lose. We swap all of Earth for one little hunk of Meropes—the city of Kraal."

Lynn, Kerry and Buck were gathered, along with Phaedru and two of the Meropians whom he had selected as aides, in the central chambers they had chosen as their headquarters. Hours, units of time which varied but slightly here from the same units on Earth, had passed since the occupation of the Kraal citadel.

The intervening time had witnessed a firmer establishment of

their footing. Their original force, though decimated by the struggle for supremacy, had now been bolstered by the addition of five thousand volunteers. There could have easily been as many more, but this was the greatest number the Kohrlan felt it was strategically possible to garrison within the confines of the citadel.

However, in the outer city were an additional twenty-five thousand Meropians, men, women and children, whose allegiance was pledged to the overthrow of the Nisthru government. The entire city was now an armed camp from which every vandal had been expunged.

It was, as Kerry had said hours ago, a foothold in Nisthru's back yard. But to what avail? For over the ultrawave radio which picked up Earth broadcasts, the expatriate worldlings had heard newsflashes which filled their hearts with sorrow.

Nisthru's first army of occupation had swept through and beyond Roanoke, across Virginia to Richmond, and north to Washington. The American capital had succumbed in incredibly short time. Its host of gorgeous governmental buildings were now heaps of smouldering rubble. Its broad avenues were piled high with the remains of those who had attempted a defense. And the invading army was speeding northward in captured vehicles to thrust a spearhead into the vital Philadelphia-New York area.

Nor was this the entire story. Had the Americans a single force to contend with, something might have been done to halt, or at least delay, the foe's advance. But it came as a stunning shock to Kerry to learn that this eastern shore movement was but one of a dozen Meropian salients. Simultaneously with the invasion of Virginia—or happening so closely on the heels of it as to be part of the same attack—had come invasions of other strategic points.

Flaming circles—Gateways of Death—had appeared in such widely diverse spots as Los Angeles, St. Louis, Kennebunkport and Charleston. Disc-weaponed warriors had poured into astonished communities near New Orleans, Seattle and Toronto. Salt Lake City was in enemy hands, Florida separated from the rest of the union by a throttling cordon flung about Jacksonville, Chicago threatened, and the wastelands of South Dakota overrun by that grimmest of harvesters—Death!

Thus the entire nation was menaced by small, highly mobile forces whose sole advantage lay in the overwhelming superiority of their weapon. As a result, the military system of the United States was cut into a host of divided, incoherent segments.

"I will admit one thing," conceded Kerry ruefully. "Nisthru's

tactics are superb. He knew exactly where and how to strike to make resistance futile. But how could he, a Meropian, know where to place his armies?"

"I know the answer to that—*now*," said the Kohrlan. "You have told me he was in your world for a matter of weeks in the disguise of a scientist named Nestor. In this personality, it was easy for Nisthru to gain the information vital to his plan. As a reputable scientist he had free access to your libraries, museums, and government archives. You Earthmen are—like most of us—a trusting people. Nisthru had little trouble in determining the location of your principal cities, your vital centers of industry, even your government arsenals and fortresses. He brought maps of Earth back here to this citadel. I have found them.

"And, of course, as the 'phantom fiend' he gathered such information as was unavailable to 'Dr. Nestor.' Military information."

"That's right, Kerry," agreed Lynn. "Remember the murdered night-watchman at the Frankford Arsenal? And how a high naval commander mysteriously disappeared? And the robbery at the War Department?"

"There's still one thing I've never been able to get straight, though," pondered Kerry. "The condenser you found a long time ago. Why was it so important that Nisthru get it back?"

"Condenser?" repeated Phaedru. "Was it like this?" He stepped to the radio instrument, pointed out a grid similar to that which Lynn had found in the Kensington gutter.

"Exactly!"

"The part," explained the Kohrlan simply, "which converts an ordinary long-wave receptor into an ultra-wave unit. Don't you see, Nisthru had to carry this part into your world with him in order to assure that when his plans were ready, the moment ripe, he could communicate with his lieutenants in Meropes.

Unfortunately for him, he lost it. But fortunately for him your newspapers blatantly advertised its location. He had only to bide his time and take it when he wanted it. Then he contacted his assistants, gave orders for the disposition of troops, and the invasion began. And he was able to flit from one world to the other through the opened Gateway."

The Kohrlan shook his head sadly.

"And now the time draws perilously near when Nisthru can transfer his headquarters from dying Meropes to your safe young world. O'Connor is right. We have gained a poor exchange indeed."

A blinding idea struck Kerry. One so great it lifted him out of his seat.

"But that time is not yet! Parallel worlds! That's the answer. Phaedru—quickly! There's not a minute to lose! I know how to beat Nisthru!"

His excitement communicated itself to the others. As one, they rose to face him.

"Yes?" croaked Phaedru eagerly.

"Listen, Nisthru cannot yet afford to lose Meropes."

O'Connor snorted. "Why not? If he gets Earth—"

"Yes! Ultimately his plan is to abandon Meropes and dominate our world. But at the present time he must retain control of this world because it is from here he gets all his supplies, his reserve troops, the Meropian metal which goes into the ultra-wave radio, new crystal discs to replace those which exhaust their charge. Isn't that right, Kohrlan?"

"Yes, my boy. But certainly you are not suggesting that we attempt to conquer his forts all over this planet? Why, there must be hundreds of them."

"I am proposing," roared Kerry exuberantly, "just that! And I know the way to do it, too! A way that cannot fail. Have you a map of Meropes? To compare with your maps of Earth? Bring it out!"

He took the map, spread it on a table before them, jabbed an excited finger as he spoke. "Here is your city of Lankaru, midway in this continent. Here is your garrison of Pryll, on the fortieth Meropian parallel. Now, here is my plan. This is what we must do—"

Long he talked, and swiftly. When he had finished there was glowing approval in the eyes of his listeners.

"It's crazy, keed, but it might work!" Buck O'Connor said slowly.

Lynn, her cheeks aflame with warm color, said, "Of course, it's crazy—but gloriously so! I'm for trying it, Kerry!"

Even Phaedru acknowledged thoughtfully, "Yes, you have read Nisthru aright, my boy. Before the threat you plan, even *he* would be forced to surrender."

"Then let's get going!" cried Kerry. "We've got to get back to Earth and put this plan into operation."

It was then that Phaedru's smile faded. Despair resettled over his fine old features.

"There is the fault in your plan, Kerry Shane," he said. "You cannot return to your world. For on all Meropes I know not

where to find enough of the vital element to power even the tiniest Gateway!"

CHAPTER IX

The Gateway of Death

"The—the vital element?" repeated Kerry wonderingly. The words had a strangely familiar ring. Suddenly he remembered where he had heard them before. In Nisthru's orders to an underling. "But what is this vital element?"

"That rare metal," explained the older man soberly, "which makes possible the Gateway between our two worlds. It is element number seventeen on our periodic table."

"Seventeen!" exclaimed Lynn. "But element seventeen is not a metal. It's a gas!"

Phaedru smiled wanly. "I'm afraid you have forgotten your chemistry, Miss Gregory. Element seventeen is a metal. One of a rather brownish color, occurring rarely in uncombined form, with a specific gravity of about two, point, two—"

"Element seventeen," contradicted Lynn, "is a gas. We call it chlorine. I don't know what your name—*Oh!*" As the import of his words struck her, her statement ended in a gasp. "Why, we're not talking about the same thing at all! You're talking about element number fourteen. Silicon!"

With his uncanny gift for recognizing a foreign word when it was spoken, Phaedru nodded. "Yes. Silicon. That is its name in your tongue. But it *is* element seventeen, Miss—"

"Wait a minute!" interrupted Kerry. "I know what is confusing you. Lynn, your dad explained it to me a long time ago. It all hinges on the fact that our two worlds do, after all, exist on different planes. Because of this, Meropes has some elements unknown to us—like the condenser metal—and we have some they don't recognize. Apparently our periodic table begins at a higher level than theirs, or something. At any rate, our number fourteen is their number seventeen. You see, Phaedru?"

"But of course," said Phaedru quickly. "And quite logical it is. However, that does not alter the fact that element seventeen is terribly, impossibly rare."

"On the contrary," cried Lynn, "it alters the fact a great deal! Phaedru, what you call the 'vital element' and we call 'silicon' is extremely common on Earth. I might even say 'dirt cheap,' because it is the basis for even the sands of the sea!"

Phaedru stared at her. "Now I understand," he said, "where

Nisthru obtained the tremendous amounts necessary to operate his dozen Gateways. I knew there was not enough for that purpose on our entire planet. But he must have hastily transmitted some of it back to Meropes and distributed it to his invasion ports." Yet again he shook his head. "However, we are now on Meropes. And no matter how common the precious element may be on your world, here it is impossible to get."

Kerry groaned. It was almost incredible that a substance which abounded on the beaches and the spas of Earth should now, by its absence, thwart their design. He stared at Lynn hopefully.

"You know chemistry, Lynn. Isn't there some way we could synthesize silicon?"

Surprisingly, the girl was smiling. She said, "And just how much of this 'vital element' is needed to operate a Gateway, Kohrlan?"

"A frightful amount," replied the old man soberly. "A king's ransom. Perhaps—perhaps a whole pound!"

"Then perhaps," cried Lynn aloud, "this will help for a start!"

She stripped from her ears a pair of gaudy costume-jewelry baubles, from her lapel a gay brooch, opened her bag and selected from its contents a vanity case which held a tiny mirror. "Come on, you boys! Empty your pockets! Among us, we must have enough silaceous products to escape!"

The simple truth dawned suddenly upon Kerry and the cameraman. "*Glass!*" they gasped.

"Right! I've been wondering all this time what it was that struck me funny about Kraal. Now I know. Its windows are paneless, they serve food and drinks in metal containers. A glass-starved world because they have no silicon. But we have plenty. Give!"

Thus began the frantic search for glass objects. A pair of watch crystals . . . the handle of a transparent mechanical pencil . . . ornamental sleeve-buttons from Lynn's jacket . . . all these went into the growing pile on the table. A scuffed sphere Buck O'Connor shamefacedly contributed.

"Used to be my pet mibsy when I was a kid," he confessed. "I've carried it ever since as a good-luck piece. I never knew it would turn out to be so lucky."

"It would be luckier," said Kerry, "if you had your Graflex here. Say—my sun-glasses! They'll help!"

At length they had exhausted their resources, and a heap of miscellaneous objects strewn the tabletop. Phaedru studied the collection with mingled raptness and doubt.

"It is remarkable!" he declared. "You Earthlings carry about on your person objects so precious that we of Meropes would put

them in a museum. But—but I'm afraid this is still short of our requirements. You are sure you have nothing else?"

"Not me," O'Connor said, "I'm clean as a bone. See?" He took off his coat, turned the pockets inside out, "Not a single thing."

But Lynn pointed at him sternly. "Take them off!" she demanded, "Huh? Wh-what?"

"Those suspenders! They're spun glass, aren't they? Kerry, how about yours?"

Kerry was already whipping the belt from his trousers. "Right! I'd forgotten all about this new-fangled stuff. Well, Phaedru, this ought to do it, shouldn't it?"

And this time the old man nodded joyously. "Yes, my boy. It will be close figuring. The Gateway will be powered for only a short time, but it should be enough for one person to return to Earth."

Thus it was that, hours later, they stood in another chamber of the citadel before a weird machine, on the platform of which stood Lynn, into the hungry maw of which had been poured all the silicon-bearing objects they had contributed. Phaedru's hand hovered over a button. He called, "Ready?"

Kerry, his brow anxious, said, "Wait a minute. Lynn, for the last time, won't you please let me?"

The girl pressed him away. "No, Kerry. You heard what Phaedru said. The Gateway is underpowered. It will be weak, its period brief. I am the smallest, the lightest of us. I stand the best chance of getting through."

"But the danger, Lynn."

"There is greater danger," she reminded him soberly, "if we fail. This is no time to think of individuals, Kerry. The happiness of two worlds is at stake. Goodbye, my dear."

"You know the plan thoroughly? You have the plans for creating Gateways?"

"Perfectly. And I am armed. Somehow I will get to the Earth authorities." She nodded to Phaedru. "Ready!"

"*Lynn!*" cried Kerry again.

But too late. Phaedru's hand had pressed the plunger. A whining scream rose from the entrails of the machine, a rosy sheen seemed to creep through its multitudinous warps and coils, a bubble of ruby flame in its heart burst like a fiery nova, expanded to a disc, a hoop, a glittering circle of flame.

Into this Lynn stepped swiftly, coolly, confidently. For an instant they glimpsed behind her a green landscape. Then . . . nothing! The circle disappeared. Phaedru turned to them.

"She has gone through," he said. "We have done all we can do for now. The rest is up to her."

"I'd rather be fighting!" gritted Kerry nervously. "I'd rather be doing anything than just sitting here on pins and needles, waiting . . . waiting . . . waiting . . ."

But he could not have dreamed that his wish was to be answered so soon. For scarcely had the words left his mouth than there violated the quiet of their chamber the sound of a crying voice, the pound of racing feet. And a Meropian broke into the room, his eyes wide with fear.

"Kohrlan!" he cried. "Come quickly! They are back! Nisthru and his army are returning from the other world, and are storming the citadel!"

It was a fortunate thing for Kerry and his comrades, and for the good of both worlds, that the scout's report was exaggerated by terror. Had the force indeed been the main bulk of Nisthru's army, Kraal might have fallen that day into Nisthru's hands and their entire scheme might have come to naught.

But it was not the whole army which had blundered back into Kraal. It was only a portion of the invading force, composed mainly of wounded men-at-arms, intelligence co-ordinators, and engineers sent back through the Virginia Gateway to bring up to the Earth salient fresh supplies.

And if the shock of the Kohrlan's followers was great at being thus discovered by Nisthru's men, that of the returning group was even greater. They had marched forth from a quiet, subdued city only to step back into an armed camp of enemies to be met by flame and death.

Hence the first battle of Kraal was no real battle at all. It was a rout, an overwhelming triumph for the defenders. The returning division of Nisthru's army never reached the walls of the citadel at all. Their vigor was expended against the citizens of the outer city, and these, fighting with newborn courage, not only succeeded in capturing the bulk of the returning group, but sent the dwindling remnant scurrying like mice for the Gateway.

Its flaming circle vanished, its power cut off from the Earth side. It could not be reopened from silicon-starved Meropes.

But the few who had escaped worried Phaedru. Seeking Kerry who, the fight concluded, had returned to his maps, he asked: "Nisthru's army, Kerry—where, according to your latest information, is it?"

Kerry placed a pencil on the Earth map before him. "Approximately here. West Chester, a suburb south of Philadelphia."

"And how far is that from Kraal—or whatever Earth city corresponds to Kraal?"

"Philly is roughly four hundred miles from Roanoke. Translated into movement, that means a minimum of two days before Nisthru can withdraw his force and attempt to storm this Gateway again. Perhaps more, because he will be harassed by Earth troops."

"And how long will it take Lynn to accomplish what must be done?"

"At least four days. Five to seven is more like it. Yes, I know what you're thinking. We must somehow hold this salient until we get word from her. You'd better get as many Kraalian citizens into the citadel as you can, and warn the others to evacuate the town."

"I have already suggested that," said the older man proudly. "But they refused. They will fight, within or outside the walls of the fortress, to the last man." Once more he glanced at the maps over which Kerry was poring. His eyes were incredulous. "That is *really* what your Earth looks like? I can scarcely believe it!"

"That's what the United States looks like," corrected Kerry, "and that is the only country we have to worry about just now, because it's the only section Nisthru attacked. Thanks to plain, dumb luck. America doesn't look much like the western hemisphere of Meropes, does it?"

"Not at all. Why, even the shape is different. The location of the principal cities, lakes, rivers—"

"The miracle is," said Kerry, "that two worlds even remotely similar should exist on two adjacent planes. It's not surprising that their geographies should differ."

One of the maps with which he played was drawn on a thin, transparent sheet, its scale matching that of the map beneath it. Now Kerry laid the first atop the second.

"This gives you a fine study of the inter-worldly differences. The differences on which our whole scheme depends."

"And let us hope," nodded the Kohrlan gravely, "our plans may be accomplished before it is too late."

Followed then three solid days of breathless waiting, days which, to strained minds and tense bodies, were more nerve-racking than could possibly have been an equal period of action. Feverishly the Meropians completed their defenses and feverishly they checked and rechecked them.

Meanwhile, Kerry listened eagerly to all news he could pick up over the ultra-wave.

For the most part, it was bad. In the west and the middle-west, the warfare continued unabated. The Nisthrumen had been slowed somewhat by the lengthening of their supply-lines, but superiority of arms still was the determining factor. Whenever an American army attempted to stop the foe in body-to-body conflict, the result was the same—victory for Nisthru. And like the spreading tentacles of an octopus the evil tide stretched across the North American continent.

From only one salient came heartening news. Joyous commentators on the eastern seaboard reported that the army of the invaders was slowly but surely being “pushed back” to the spot whence it had come. Only the Earth listeners in another world knew the false logic on which this optimism was based.

“He’s not being pushed back,” Buck O’Connor growled. “He’s coming back on purpose. To wipe us out before he goes on with his dirty work! But how about Lynn, Kerry? Nobody has mentioned her at all! Surely the commentators—”

“Government censorship,” said Kerry. “They dare not mention her return from Meropes, or our plan. That would invite disaster. No news is good news.”

But in his heart of hearts there was lurking fear and doubt. For there was no way of being sure that Lynn had even survived the perilous trip through the Gateway, or that she ever had reached Earth’s militiamen at all.

Then, on the morning of the fourth day, like a tornado roaring from the heart of the tortured sea, the storm broke! As guardians watched, a familiar cherry-red bubble burst in midair where the two worlds met in point of common conjunction. The bubble became a hoop, the hoop a gigantic, flaming circle, and—the Gateway was open!

And now the long truce died in a maelstrom of fury! The Nisthrumen had come back to destroy and subdue. The followers of Phaedru knew their responsibility. Equally well-armed were both armies. And thunder rocked the heavens as the twain grim horsemen, War and Death, rode their triumphant way across the bodies of broken men.

For hours the gage of battle met, held, locked, at the Gateway itself. At first it seemed the defenders would again thrust their foes back into the younger world. Then a gradual change overswept the complexion of the fray. Alike were their weapons, equal the determination of the opposing forces—but superior in numbers was Nisthru’s primary army.

Kerry, who against Phaedru’s pleading had insisted on leading a division of the civic army, saw at last that his position was unten-

able. He ordered a retreat to the citadel. Guerrilla bands, fighting from housetops, alleyways, behind breastworks of furniture torn ruthlessly from once-carefree homes, covered the retreat with a magnificent rear-guard action. And the outer city of Kraal was evacuated by all save those loyalists to whom death had brought surcease from combat, and the advancing hordes of Nisthru.

But once their forces had been reassembled in the citadel, that was another story! Here they were protected by massive walls. Here it was the enemy who must pay dearly for each inch of ground gained. And it was after battering futilely at this bulwark for hours that Nisthru sought parley with his adversaries.

He approached them, as they had known he might, by radio. His demands were exacting, almost contemptuous.

"Lay down your arms, Kerry Shane!" he rasped. "You fight a purposeless battle. But I am weary of wasting time and energy on a madman. I will grant you a concession. Lay down your arms and you will be allowed to live."

"Quite sporting of him!" growled O'Connor.

Kerry silenced his friend. Over the two-way hook-up he asked, "And if we don't, Nisthru?"

"You Earthborn fool, have you gone mad? This is not a request, but a demand! Do you think you can stand before my triumphant armies? Already we hold all of Meropes in our grasp save your one, filthy rathole. And soon your native America will also be ours. After that, all of your planet."

"But if we don't, Nisthru?" repeated Kerry mockingly.

"Very well!" Rage seethed in the Meropian's voice. "You have had your last chance. I shall make an example of you. I'll show two worlds the fate which lies in store for those who dare pit themselves against Nisthru, Kohrlan of Meropes and Earth! Reconcile yourselves to annihilation!"

The connection was abruptly severed. Kerry turned to the old Meropian seriously.

"Well, that's that. What will he do, Phaedru?"

"What he says, I fear. Nisthru went far—for him—when he offered us our lives. He made that concession only that the citadel might fall into his hands unharmed, I suspect, because he needs its supplies, its arsenal. Or maybe there remains a drop of reverence in his blood for the ancient shrines.

"The Citadel of Kraal has a hallowed place in the traditions of Meropes. But now not even those considerations will deter him. He will attack with every force at his disposal. He will destroy the entire edifice, if no other way is left open to him."

‘He’s get to forge a breach first,’ gritted the young Earthman. “Come on, Buck! This looks like the showdown.”

So the second battle of Kraal went into its final stage. Disregarding all tradition, Nisthru threw against the fortress of his homeland all those devastating forces which had smashed a triumphant pathway across the parched plains of Virginia.

His warriors turned to fullest force the searing rays of their crystal discs. And where had been lethal weapons before, now the citadel’s defenders faced lightnings that not only crisped the life-blood in their veins, but sparked to incandescence the solid walls behind which they fought, the very ramparts on which they stood.

Gallantly they fought, and gallantly they died, answering flame with flame, death with death, to save this last stronghold. But they were slowly forced to give ground as walls, gutted and crumbling, crashed before them, and streams of molten rock flowed lavalike from breastworks that had once been sturdy stone.

The attackers died, too, lashed and scourged by the retaliatory fire of their adversaries, but the Gateway was wide open now, and through it flooded an inexhaustible host of warriors. New faces filled gaps in ranks decimated by withering blasts. Inexorably, the Nisthrumen pressed forward to the heart of the citadel.

Through this hell of blood and flame, miraculously Kerry Shane still moved. He was a worn and haggard defender now, his sweat-soaked clothing clinging to him like rags, his face blackened with the ash of fire and ruin. More than once had he felt the blistering tongue of death lick by him, more than once been forced to flee desperately as a buttress behind which he crouched groaned and cascaded tons of shattered stone where a moment before he had been.

But there was no heroism in this. Starkly realistic, Kerry knew he took no risk not taken by the lowliest of his comrades-in-arms. It was only the faulty rolling of fortune’s die that left him still on his feet while so many countless others fell.

And the citadel of Kraal was falling! There was no doubt about that. Its ring of outer defenses had been melted away as tinfoil sloughs in a candle-flame. The Meropian Kremlin was a battered hulk through which bloodstained lunatics thundered, mingling their cries of rage and hatred and pain with the tumult of grinding masonry. Nisthru had made good his boast. Though victory had cost him dearly—fully half his original force had been destroyed—the uprising was in its death throes.

In this extremity, those who had dared to pit their feeble forces against his power gathered in that spot where they had determined to make their last stand. The inner chamber from which they had rescued Lynn Gregory.

Here the Kohrlan Phaedru awaited them, face haggard with weariness and despair. Here he took and wrung briefly the hands of those two not of his world who had fought that Meropes might be free.

"This is the end, my friends," he said sadly. "Our army is smashed. Those few who still guard this chamber will go soon to join their brothers. Then we, too, shall feel the wrath of Nisthru. But I do not regret anything we have done . . . or tried to do. Though we fail, still the cause was good. And I, Phaedru of Meropes, thank you."

"But we're not licked yet!" Kerry ground out savagely. "We can't be! There must be *some* way out of this trap."

His answer came from the doorway. The tumult outside had a moment before flared to unprecedented heights of violence, then died away. Now, crystal disc full upon them, eyes gleaming with triumph, through the doorway stepped the author of all their grief.

"There is no way, Kerry Shane!" laughed Nisthru of Meropes grimly. "For the trap is sprung. And your moment has come to its close!"

CHAPTER X

Geography Lesson

Buck O'Connor cried, "*You!*" And his hand leaped to his belt.

But swiftly as he moved, Nisthru moved even more swiftly. The crystal disc emitted a shimmering streamer of light, Buck's half-drawn weapon slipped from loosening grip and shattered on the floor, the cameraman's arm fell to his side, dangled limply.

Nisthru smiled coldly. "You see, even now I am inclined to be merciful. I could have easily destroyed your man for his rashness, Shane. But oddly enough, I feel a stir of admiration for you three. Of the millions in two worlds, you are the only ones who have in the slightest way, for a second of time, delayed the accomplishment of my plans."

"Skip the mealy-mouthed talk, Nisthru," said Kerry wearily. "You've won. We can take whatever you have to dish out without eulogies."

The Kohrlan Nisthru sighed. "It is unfortunate, Shane, that courage such as yours must be ruled by the heart rather than by

logic. I could use such a man as you in organizing my new empire. But—”

“But nothing! You don’t hold your fire to swap compliments. What do you want?”

Shane’s continued, deliberate defiance finally got through the other’s hide. Nisthru’s brow darkened.

“Very well, spawn of Earth,” he said curtly. “I waste my time. The battle for Kraal is ended. Those who followed you are dead or captured. Your proud America is on the verge of surrender. So I am free to consider for a moment my—er—personal interests. Where is she?”

“She?”

“You know whom I mean. The girl, Lynn Gregory. I left her in this chamber. Where have you hidden her?”

Kerry grinned. “If you were to live a million years, Nisthru,” he giped, “and comb two worlds with a thousand men, you would never find her.”

For the fraction of a second a look of dismay swept the other man’s face. “You mean—she is dead?”

“No. But she is gone beyond your reach. I told you once you underestimated the fighting spirit of Americans, Nisthru. It is typified in Lynn. Even though Kraal falls and we die, even though the great cities of the United States fall, *still* America will fight on. In the plains and the hills, in the rugged mountains and the frozen lakelands of the north.”

Nisthru laughed shortly. “Valiant words, Kerry Shane, but more poetic than accurate. Let the scum hide in the forests. The cities of Earth and the richness of your world will be mine. Nothing in the universe can stop me now. Nothing!”

It was as if his words had been a signal, as if the gods who determine the fate of men had wearied at last of one braggart’s vain boasting. For even as Nisthru’s sardonic laughter rang out, there came an interruption. A cry lifted in a familiar voice from the speaker of the ultra-wave radio.

“Kerry! Kerry Shane! Can you hear me?”

Kerry whirled toward the instrument, heart pounding. “Lynn! Yes, I can hear you!”

“Then—*act!* All is ready! Our engineers stand by their machines. Give the word and their hands press the keys that will smash Nisthru’s dream to nothingness!”

Phaedru’s breath burst from his lips in a great cry of thanksgiving.

“Now thank Those who guard the fate of man,” he cried. “Victory is snatched from defeat.”

And Buck O'Connor's words were less ecclesiastic but equally joyful. "Great day in the morning, Kerry—she's done it! *Yip-pee!*"

Nisthru's eyes clouded blackly, and he stared at the trio with swift, darting suspicion.

"What is this madness?" he demanded harshly. "What does the woman mean?"

Kerry moved to the table at which he had worked so long and so laboriously, snatched up the maps which had been the keynote of his strategy, shoved them before the Meropian's eyes.

"She means, Nisthru, that you are done—licked—ruined! You see these maps? Watch as I superimpose the map of the United States over that of your home corner of Meropes. Now. See the geographical differences of the two worlds?"

"Do you see how your great city of Lankaru is adjacent to that area over which our mightiest river, the Mississippi, discharges into its Delta? You see how your military arsenal at Pryll is in conjunction with our Lake Erie? And do you see that the American Coulee Dam exactly covers a point which on your world is the terrible volcano of Duuma?"

"Lynn Gregory is on Earth, Nisthru. At her advice, the American Army has built not one but a hundred Gateways. These openings have been strategically placed here . . . and here . . ."

Kerry's finger jabbed at vital spots on the superimposed maps. "When I say the word, those *Gateways will be opened!* All Meropes will be deluged beneath a hell of flood and fire and death! Your mightiest cities will drown beneath thundering cascades from our Great Lakes, our rivers! Your world will flame into oblivion when volcanoes erupt."

Nisthru's lips paled, his swarthy cheeks became the color of ash. An emotion which was half rage, half terrible fear, gripped and shook him.

"It—it is impossible!" he cried choking. "You cannot have done this! You lie to me! And—for lying you shall all die—*now!*"

Kerry's command stayed his finger on the disc.

"Hold it, Nisthru! We are even prepared for that. The city of Roanoke, which lies adjacent to Kraal, is mined with tons of dynamite. A false move from you and all of us will be blown into smithereens!"

At this the false Kohlran gave way to his last and fatal madness. His watchers could see the sanity leave his eyes, the gibbering frenzy of frustration turn him from a man to a beast.

He opened his lips and screamed aloud, a scream of rage and anguish. Like a trapped animal his eyes roved from side to side, his

breath rasped in great, broken sobs. From his eyes burst hot tears.

"Then *let* all die!" he shouted. "Let both worlds flame into oblivion."

And he leveled his disc upon them. His hand tensed on the release stud.

Then suddenly, before Kerry, there blossomed a gust of crimson flame. Withering heat forced Kerry back, blinded him. When he could see again, Nisthru was gone! Where he had been, nothing remained but a wisp of smoking ash, bitter with the stench of charred flesh. And from behind drawled the voice of Buck O'Connor.

"He wasn't so smart after all. Too cocksure of himself to disarm us. I knew if he ever took his eyes off me for a second I could get him with my left hand. The guy with the gun's always right, Kerry. And I had two of 'em." Then, with a tenderness strange for him: "Okay now, Youse. The pass is completed."

"There is a true adage in your tongue," said Phaedru quietly. "'Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad.'"

Afterward—long afterward—they stood once more in the noisy room where all this had begun. In the City Room of the Philadelphia *News-Tribune*. That is, three of them stood there. The three whose lives were concerned with the ever-new problem of recording yesterday's history.

"—and this guy Phaedru!" Sammy Vaughn was wailing. "You let him get away without even a signed statement! What a stupid bunch of news-hounds you are! Why, his byline would be worth a million bucks!"

"Take it easy!" soothed Kerry. "We'll get all the stories we want from him later. Just now he's having a good old-fashioned gabfest with the President. After all, Meropes *is* a dying world, you know. Some arrangements must be made for the migration of its people to this world. Maybe to Africa. There's plenty of room on that continent for a friendly race of fellow-beings."

"And pix!" moaned Vaughn. "You, O'Connor! For two cents I'd boot you from here to Camden. Right on deck while everything was happening—and you didn't bring back a single shot. What kind of a cameraman are you?"

"A terrible one," admitted Buck cheerfully. "So what? So I'll make it up to you. This afternoon I'll go out to the zoo and get pictures of somebody's itty-bitty tot feeding the penguins. Well—so long, folks!"

And he slouched from the room, a far-from-heroic figure in

scuffed 'tweeds, a man who rose only to the heights when the chips were down, when the odds were toughest.

"There," said Kerry softly, "goes a real guy!"

Vaughn snorted at him. "There goes a lazy bum, you mean! Well—get going, you two! I want stories. Plenty of stories. You're newspapermen, aren't you?"

It was Lynn Gregory who contradicted him.

"I'm afraid we are not, Mr. Vaughn. Oh, Kerry is a newspaperman. And after the honeymoon he'll be back on the job again. But I've discovered that a career isn't the finest thing in the world. So if you don't mind, I'd like to hand in my resignation now. Kerry and I"—she placed her hand in the delighted reporter's larger one—"have a lot of lost time to make up. Haven't we, Kerry, darling?"

"And," said Kerry enthusiastically "how!" To Vaughn he added, "You see how it is, don't you, Sammy?"

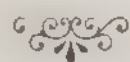
Sammy Vaughn sighed. It was getting late, and he had a deadline to meet. And maybe it wasn't so bad after all. He liked his men to be married, settled down. It made them more dependable.

"Oh, get the dickens out of here !" he grumbled. "And about that honeymoon—put it on the expense account, Kerry. I don't want thanks! No, Lynn! Don't *do* that! I'm a respectable man—"

But as they left, hand in hand, he stood looking after them with a grin on his lips and a warmth in his heart. He brushed his lips with a handkerchief and sniffed.

"Lipstick!" Then he coughed loudly and yelled in a voice of thunder:

"*Copy boy! Copy! Hey, copy—*"







Captain Chaos

The Callisto-bound *Leo* needed a cook. What it got was a piping-voiced Jonah who jinxed it straight into Chaos.

WE PICKED UP OUR NEW COOK ON PHOBOS. NOT Phoebus or Phoebe; I mean Phobos, Mars' inner moon. Our regular victual mangler came down with acute indigestion—tasted some of his own cooking, no doubt—when we were just one blast of a jet-tube out of Sand City spaceport. But since we were rocketing under sealed orders, we couldn't turn back.

So we laid the *Leo* down on Phobos' tiny cradle-field and bundled our ailing grub-hurler off to a hospital, and the skipper said to me, "Mister Dugan," he said, "go out and find us a cook!"

"Aye, sir!" I said, and went.

Only it wasn't that easy. In those days, Phobos had only a handful of settlers, and most of them had good-paying jobs. Besides, we were at war with the Outer Planets, and no man in his right senses wanted to sign for a single-trip jump on a rickety old patrolship bound for nobody-knew-where. And, of course, cooks are a dime-a-dozen when you don't need one, but when you've got to locate one in a hurry they're as difficult to find as petticoats in a nudist camp.

I tried the restaurants and the employment agencies, but it was no dice. I tried the hotels and the tourist homes and even one or two of the cleaner-looking joy-joints. Again I drew a blank. So,

getting desperate, I audioed a plaintive appeal to the wealthy Phobosian colonists, asking that one of the more patriotic sons-of-riches donate a chef's services to the good old I.P.S., but my only response was a loud silence.

So I went back to the ship. I said, "Sorry, sir. We're up against it. I can't seem to find a cook on the whole darned satellite."

The skipper scowled at me from under a corduroy brow and fumed, "But we've got to have a cook, Dugan! We can't go on without one!"

"In a pinch," I told him, "I might be able to boil a few pies, or scramble us a steak or something, Skipper."

"Thanks, Dugan, but that won't do. On this trip the men must be fed regularly and well. Makeshift meals are O.Q. on an ordinary run, but when you're running the blockade—"

He stopped abruptly. But too late; I had caught his slip of the tongue. I stared at him. I said, "The blockade, sir? Then you've read our orders?"

The Old Man nodded soberly.

"Yes. You might as well know, Lieutenant. Everyone will be told as soon as the *Leo* lifts gravs again. My orders were to be opened four hours after leaving Sand City. I read them a few minutes ago.

"We are to attempt to run the Outer Planets Alliance blockade at any spot which reconnaissance determines as favorable. Our objective is Jupiter's fourth satellite, Callisto. The Solar Federation Intelligence Department has learned of a loyalist uprising on that moon. It is reported that Callisto is weary of the war, with a little prompting will secede from the Alliance and return to the Federation.

"If this is true, it means we have at last found the foothold we have been seeking; a salient within easy striking distance of Jupiter, capital of the Alliance government. Our task is to verify the rumor and, if it be true, make a treaty with the Callistans."

I said, "Sweet howling stars—some assignment, sir! A chance to end this terrible war . . . form a permanent union of the entire Solar family . . . bring about a new age of prosperity and happiness."

"If," Cap O'Hara reminded me, "we succeed. But it's a tough job. We can't expect to win through the enemy cordon unless our men are in top physical condition. And that means a sound, regular diet. So we must find a cook, or—"

"The search," interrupted an oddly high-pitched, but not unpleasant voice, "is over. Where's the galley?"

I whirled, and so did the Old Man. Facing us was an outlandish little figure; a slim, trim, natty little Earthman not more than five-foot-two in height; a smooth-cheeked young fellow swaddled in a spaceman's uniform at least three sizes too large. Into the holster of his harness was thrust a Haemholtz ray-pistol big enough to burn an army, and in his right hand he brandished a huge, gleaming carving-knife. He frowned at us impatiently.

"Well," he repeated impatiently, "where is it?"

The Old Man stared.

"W-who," he demanded dazedly, "might you be?"

"I might be," retorted the little stranger, "lots of people. But I came here to be your new cook."

O'Hara said, "The new—What's your name, mister?"

"Andy," replied the newcomer. "Andy Laney."

The Old Man's lip curled speculatively. "Well, Andy Laney," he said, "you don't look like much of a cook to *me*."

But the little mug just returned the Old Man's gaze coolly. "Which makes it even," he retorted. "*You* don't look like much of a skipper to *me*. Do I get the job, or don't I?"

The captain's grin faded, and his jowls turned pink. I stepped forward hastily. I said, "Excuse me, sir, shall I handle this?" Then, because the skipper was still struggling for words: "You," I said to the little fellow, "are a cook?"

"One of the best!" he claimed complacently.

"You're willing to sign for a blind journey?"

"Would I be here," he countered, "if I weren't?"

"And you have your space certificate?"

"I—" began the youngster.

"Smart Aleck!" That was the Old Man, exploding into coherence at last. "Rat-tailed, clever-cracking little smart aleck! Don't look like much of a skipper, eh? Well, my fine young rooster—"

I said quickly, "If you don't mind, sir, this is no time to worry over trifles. 'Any port in a storm,' you know. And if this young man *can* cook—"

The skipper's color subsided. So did he, grumbling. "Well, perhaps you're right, Dugan. All right, Slops, you're hired. The galley's on the second level, port side. Mess in three quarters of an hour. Get going! Dugan, call McMurtrie and tell him we lift graves immediately—*Slops!* What are you doing at that table?"

For the little fellow had sidled across the control-room and now, eyes gleaming inquisitively, was peering at our trajectory charts. At the skipper's roar he glanced up at us eagerly.

"Vesta!" he piped in that curiously high-pitched and mellow

voice. "Loft trajectory for Vesta! Then we're trying to run the Alliance blockade, Captain?"

"None of your business!" bellowed O'Hara in tones of thunderous outrage. "Get below instantly, or by the lavender lakes of Luna I'll—"

"If I were you," interrupted our diminutive new chef thoughtfully, "I'd try to broach the blockade off Iris rather than Vesta. For one thing, their patrol line will be thinner there; for another, you can come in through the Meteor Bog, using it as a cover."

"*Mr. Dugan!*"

The Old Man's voice had an ominous ring to it, one I had seldom heard. I sprang to attention and saluted smartly. "Aye, sir?"

"Take this—this culinary tactician out of my sight before I forget I'm an officer and a gentleman. And tell him that when I want advice I'll come down to the galley for it!"

A hurt look crept into the youngster's eyes. Slowly he turned and followed me from the turret, down the ramp, and into the pan-lined cubicle which was his proper headquarters. When I was turning to leave he said apologetically, "I didn't mean any harm, Mr. Dugan. I was just trying to help."

"You must learn not to speak out of turn, youngster," I told him sternly. "The Old Man's one of the smartest space navigators who ever lifted grays. He doesn't need the advice or suggestions of a cook."

"But I was raised in the Belt," said the little chap plaintively. "I know the Bog like a book. And I was right; our safest course *is* by way of Iris."

Well, there you are! You try to be nice to someone, and what happens? He tees off on you. I got a little sore I guess. Anyhow, I told the little squirt off, but definitely.

"Now, listen!" I said bluntly. "You volunteered for the job. Now you've got to take what comes with it: orders! From now on, suppose you take care of the cooking and let the rest of us worry about the ship—Captain Slops!"

And I left, banging the door behind me hard.

So we hit the spaceways for Vesta, and after a while the Old Man called up the crew and told them our destination, and if you think they were scared or nervous or anything like that, why you just don't know spacemen. From oil-soaked old Jock McMurtrie, the Chief Engineer, all the way down the line to Willy, our cabin-boy, the *Leo's* complement was as thrilled as a sub-deb at an Academy hop.

John Wainwright, our First Officer, licked his chops like a fox in a hen-house and said, "The blockade! Oboyoboy! Maybe we'll tangle with one of the Alliance ships, hey?"

Blinky Todd, an ordinary with highest rating, said with a sort of macabre satisfaction, "I hopes we *do* meet up with 'em, that's whut I does, sir! Never did have no love for them dirty, skulkin' Outlanders, that's whut I didn't!"

And one of the black-gang blasters, a taciturn chap, said nothing—but the grim set of his jaw and the purposeful way he spat on his callused paws were mutely eloquent.

Only one member of the crew was absent from the conclave. Our new Slops. He was busy preparing midday mess, it seems, because scarcely had the skipper finished talking than the audio hummed and a cheerful call rose from the galley:

"Soup's on! Come and get it!"

Which we did. And whatever failings "Captain Slops" might have, he had not exaggerated when he called himself one of the best cooks in space. That meal, children, was a meal! When it comes to victuals I can destroy better than describe, but there was stuff and things and such-life, all smothered in gravy and so on, and huge quantities of this and that and the other thing, all of them unbelievably dee-luscious!

Beyond a doubt it was the finest feast we of the *Leo* had enjoyed in a 'coon's age. Even the Old Man admitted that as, leaning back from the table, he patted the pleasant bulge due south of his belt buckle. He rang the bell that summoned Slops from the galley, and the little fellow came bustling in apprehensively.

"Was everything all right, sir?" he asked.

"Not only all right, Slops," wheezed Captain O'Hara, "but perfect! Accept my congratulations on a superb meal, my boy. Did you find everything O.Q. in the galley?"

"Captain Slops" blushed like a stereo-struck school-gal, and fidgeted from one foot to another.

"Oh, thank you, sir! Thank you very much. Yes, the galley was in fine order. That is—" He hesitated—"there *is* one little thing, sir."

"So? Well, speak up, son, what is it? I'll get it fixed for you right away." The Old Man smiled archly. "Must have everything shipshape for a tip-top chef, what!"

The young hash-slinger still hesitated bashfully.

"But it's such a *little* thing, sir, I almost hate to bother you with it."

"No trouble at all. Just say the word."

"Well, sir," confessed Slops reluctantly, "I need an incinerator in the galley. The garbage-disposal system in there now is old-fashioned, inconvenient and unsanitary. You see, I have to carry the waste down two levels to the rocket-chamber in order to expel it."

The skipper's brow creased.

"I'm sorry, Slops," he said, "but I don't see how we can do anything about that. Not just now, at any rate. That job requires equipment we don't have aboard. After this jump is over I'll see what I can do."

"Oh, I realize we don't have the regular equipment," said Slops shyly, "but I've figured out a way to get the same effect with equipment we do have. There's an old Nolan heat-cannon rusting in the storeroom. If that could be installed by the galley vent, I could use it as an incinerator."

I said, "Hold everything, Slops! You can't do that! It's against regulations. Code 44, Section xvi, says, 'Fixed armament shall be placed only in gunnery embrasures insulated against the repercussions of firing charges, re-radiation, or other hazards accruent to heavy ordnance.'"

Our little chef's face fell. "Now, that's too bad," he said discouragedly. "I was planning a special banquet for tomorrow, with roast marsh-duck and all the fixings, pinberry pie—but, oh, well!—if I have no incinerator—"

The skipper's eyes bulged, and he drooled like a pup at a barbeque. He was a bit of a sybarite, was Captain David O'Hara; if there was anything he dearly loved to exercise his molars on it was Venusian marsh-duck topped with a dessert of Martian pinberry pie. He said:

"We-e-ell, now, Mr. Dugan, let's not be too technical. After all, that rule was put in the book only to prevent persons which shouldn't ought to do so from having control of ordnance. But that isn't what Slops wants the cannon for, is it, son? So I don't see any harm in rigging up the old Nolan in the galley for incineration purposes. Did you say *all* the fixings, Slops?"

Maybe I was mistaken, but for a moment I suspected I caught a queer glint in our little chef's eyes; it might have been gratitude, or, on the other hand, it might have been self-satisfaction. Whatever it was it passed quickly, and Captain Slops' soft voice was smooth as silk when he said:

"Yes, Captain, all the fixings. I'll start cooking the meal as soon as the new incinerator is installed."

* * *

So that was that. During the night watch two men of the crew lugged the ancient Nolan heat-cannon from stores and I went below to check. I found young Slops bent over the old cannon, giving it a strenuous and thorough cleaning. The way he was oiling and scrubbing at that antique reminded me of an apprentice gunner coddling his first charge.

I must have startled him, entering unexpectedly as I did, for when I said, "Hi, there!" he jumped two feet and let loose a sissy little piping squeal. Then, crimson-faced with embarrassment, he said, "Oh, h-hello, Lieutenant. I was just getting my new incinerator shipshape. Looks O.Q., eh?"

"If you ask me," I said, "it looks downright lethal. The Old Man must be off his gravs to let a young chuckle-head like you handle that toy."

"But I'm only going to use it," he said plaintively, "to dispose of garbage."

"Well, don't dump your cans when there are any ships within range," I warned him glumly, "or there'll be a mess of human scraps littering up the void. That gun may be a museum piece, but it still packs a wallop."

"Yes, sir," said Slops meekly. "I'll be careful how I use it, sir."

I had finished my inspection, and I sniggered as his words reminded me of a joke I'd heard at a spacemans' smoker.

"Speaking of being careful, did you hear the giggler about the old maid at the Martian baths? Well, it seems this perennial spinster wandered, by accident, into the men's shower room and met up with a brawny young prospector—"

Captain Slops said, "Er—excuse me, Lieutenant, but I have to get this marsh-duck stuffed."

"Plenty of time, Slops. Wait till you hear this; it will kill you. The old maid got flustered and said, 'Oh, I'm sorry! I must be in the wrong compartment—' "

"If you don't mind, Mr. Dugan," interrupted the cook loudly, "I'm awfully busy. I don't have any time for—"

"The prospector looked her over carefully for a couple of seconds then answered, 'That's O.Q. by me, sister. I won't—' "

"I—I've got to go now, Lieutenant," shouted Slops. "Just remembered something I've got to get from stores." And without even waiting to hear the wallop at the end of my tale he fled from the galley, very pink and flustered.

So there was one for the log-book! Not only did our emergency chef lack a sense of humor, but the little punk was bashful, as well!

Still, it was no skin off my nose if Slops wanted to miss the funniest yarn of a decade. I shrugged and went back to the control turret.

All that, to make an elongated story brief, happened on the first day out of Mars. As any schoolchild knows, it's a full hundred million from the desert planet to the asteroid belt. In those days, there was no such device as a Velocity-Intensifier unit, and the *Leo*, even though she was then considered a reasonably fast little patroller, muddled along at a mere 400,000 mph. Which meant it would take us at least ten days, perhaps more, to reach that disputed region of space around Vesta, where the Federation outposts were sparse and the Alliance block began.

That period of jetting was a mingled joy and pain in the britches. Captain Slops was responsible for both.

For one thing, as I've hinted before, he was a bit of a pantywaist. It wasn't so much the squeaky voice or the effeminate gestures he cut loose with from time to time. One of the roughest, toughest scoundrels who ever cut a throat on Venus was "High G" Gordon, who talked like a boy soprano, and the meanest pirate who ever highjacked a freighter was "Runt" Hake—who wore diamond earrings and gold fingernail polish!

But it was Slops' general attitude that isolated him from the command and crew. In addition to being a most awful prude, he was a killjoy. When just for a lark we begged him to boil us a pot of spaghetti, so we could pour a cold worm's nest into Rick Bramble's bed, he shuddered and refused.

"Certainly not!" he piped indignantly. "You must be out of your minds! I never heard of such a disgusting trick! Of course, I won't be a party to it. Worms—Ugh!"

"Yeah!" snorted Johnny Wainwright disdainfully, "And *ugh!* to you, too. Come on, Joe, let's get out of here before we give Slops bad dreams and goose-flesh!"

Nor was hypersensitiveness Slops' worst failing. If he was squeamish about off-color jokes and such stuff, he had no compunctions whatsoever against sticking his nose in where it didn't belong.

He was an inveterate prowler. He snooped everywhere and anywhere from ballast-bins to bunk-rooms. He quizzed the Chief about engine-room practices, the gunner's mate on problems of ballistics, even the cabin-boy on matters of supplies and distribution of same. He was not only an asker; he was a teller, as well. More than once during the next nine days he forced on the skipper the same gratuitous advice which before had enraged the Old

Man. By sheer perseverance he earned the title I had tagged him with: "Captain Slops."

I was willing to give him another title, too—Captain Chaos. God knows he created enough of it!

"It's a mistake to broach the blockade at Vesta," he argued over and over again.

"O.Q., Slops," the skipper would nod agreeably, with his mouth full of some temper-softening tidbit, "you're right and I'm wrong, as you usually are. But I'm in command of the *Leo*, and you ain't. Now, run along like a good lad and bring me some more of this salad."

So ten days passed, and it was on the morning of the eleventh day out of Sand City that we ran into trouble with a capital T. I remember that morning well, because I was in the mess-hall having breakfast with Cap O'Hara, and Slops was playing another variation on the old familiar theme.

"I glanced at the chart this morning, sir," he began as he minced in with a platterful of golden flapjacks and an ewer of Vermont maple syrup, "and I see we are but an hour or two off Vesta. I am very much afraid this is our last chance to change course—"

"And for that," chuckled the Old Man, "Hooray! Pass them pancakes, son. Maybe now you'll stop shooting off about how we ought to of gone by way of Iris. Mmmm! Good!"

"Thank you, sir," said Slops mechanically. "But you realize there is extreme danger of encountering enemy ships?"

"Keep your pants on, Slops!"

"Eh?" The chef looked startled. "Beg pardon, sir?"

"I said keep your pants on. Sure, I know. And I've took precautions. There's a double watch on duty, and men at every gun. If we do meet up with an Alliance craft, it'll be just too bad for them!"

"Yes, sirree!" The Old Man grinned comfortably. "I almost hope we do bump into one. After we burn it out of the void we'll have clear sailing all the way to Callisto."

"But—but if there should be more than one, sir?"

"Don't be ridiculous, my boy. Why should there be?"

"Well, for one thing," wrangled our pint-sized cook, "because rich ekalastron deposits were recently discovered on Vesta. For another, because Vesta's orbit is now going into aphelion stage, which will favor a concentration of raiders."

The skipper choked, spluttered, and disgorged a bite of half-masticated pancake.

"Eka—Great balls of fire! Are you sure?"

"Of course, I'm sure. I told you days ago that I was born and raised in the Belt, Captain."

"I know. But why didn't you tell me about Vesta before? I mean about the ekalastron deposits?"

"Why—why, because—" said Slops. "Because—"

"Don't give me lady-logic, you dope!" roared the Old Man, an enraged lion now, his breakfast completely forgotten. "Give me a sensible answer! If you'd told me *that* instead of just yipping and yapping about how via Iris was a nicer route I'd have listened to you! As it is, we're blasting smack-dab into the face of danger. And us on the most vital mission of the whole ding-busted war!"

He was out of his seat, bustling to the audio, buzzing Lieutenant Wainwright on the bridge.

"Johnny—that you? Listen, change traj quick! Set a new course through the Belt by way of Iris and the Bog, and hurry up, because—"

What reason he planned to give I do not know, for he never finished that sentence. At that moment the *Leo* rattled like a Model AA spacesled in an ionic storm, rolled, quivered and slewed like a drunk on a freshly-waxed floor. The motion needed no explanation; it was unmistakeable to any spacer who has ever hopped the blue. Our ship had been gripped, and was now securely locked, in the clutch of a tractor beam!

What happened next was everything at once. Officers Wainwright and Bramble were in the turret, and they were both good sailors. They knew their duties and how to perform them. An instant after the *Leo* had been assaulted, the ship bucked and slithered again, this time with the repercussions of our own ordnance. Over the audio, which Sparks had hastily converted into an all-way, inter-ship communicating unit, came a jumble of voices. A call for Captain O'Hara to "Come to the bridge, sir!" . . . the harsh query of Chief McMurtrie, "Tractor beams on stern and prow, sir. Shall I attempt to break them?" . . . and a thunderous *groooooom!* from the fore gunnery port as a crew went into action . . . a plaintive little shriek from somebody . . . maybe from Slops himself.

Then on an ultra-wave carrier, drowning local noises beneath waves of sheer volume came English words spoken with a foreign intonation. The voice of the Alliance commander.

"Ahoy the *Leo*! Calling the captain of the *Leo*!"

O'Hara, his great fists knotted at his sides, called back, "O'Hara of the *Leo* answering. What do you want?"

“Stand by to admit a boarding party, Captain. It is futile to resist. You are surrounded by six armed craft, and your vessel is locked in our tensiles. Any further effort to make combat will bring about your immediate destruction!”

From the bridge, topside, snarled Johnny Wainwright, “The hell with ’em, Skipper! Let’s fight it out!” And elsewhere on the *Leo* angry voices echoed the same defiance. Never in my life had I felt such a heartwarming love for and pride in my companions as at that tense moment. But the Old Man shook his head, and his eyes were glistening.

“It’s no use,” he moaned strickenly, more to himself than to me. “I can’t sacrifice brave men in a useless cause, Dugan. I’ve got to—” He faced the audio squarely. To the enemy commander he said, “Very good, sir! In accordance with the Rules of War, I surrender into your hands!”

The firing ceased, and a stillness like that of death blanketed the *Leo*.

It was then that Andy Laney, who had lingered in the galley doorway like a frozen figurine, broke into babbling incredulous speech. “You—you’re giving up like this?” he bleated. “Is this all you’re going to do?”

The Old Man just looked at him, saying never a word, but that glance would have blistered the hide off a Mercurian steelback. I’m more impetuous. I turned on the little idiot vituperatively.

“Shut up, you fool! Don’t you realize there’s not a thing we can do but surrender? Dead, we’re of no earthly use to anyone. Alive, there is always a chance one of us may get away, bring help. We have a mission to fulfil, an important one. Corpses can’t run errands.”

“But—but if they take us prisoners,” he questioned fearfully, “what will they do with us?”

“A concentration camp somewhere. Perhaps on Vesta.”

“And the *Leo*?”

“Who knows? Maybe they’ll send it to Jupiter with a prize crew in command.”

“That’s what I thought. But they mustn’t be allowed to do that! We’re marked with the Federation tricolor!”

A sharp retort trembled on the tip of my tongue, but I never uttered it. Indeed, I swallowed it as comprehension dawned. There came to me the beginnings of respect for little Andy Laney’s wisdom. He had been right about the danger of the Vesta route, as we had learned to our cost; now he was right on this other score.

The skipper got it, too. His jaw dropped. He said, “Heaven

help us, it's the truth! To reach Jupiter you've got to pass Callisto. If the Callistans saw a Federation vessel, they'd send out an emissary to greet it. Our secret would be discovered, Callisto occupied by the enemy. . . ."

I think he would have turned, then, and given orders to continue the fight even though it meant suicide for all of us. But it was too late. Already our lock had opened to the attackers; down the metal ramp we now heard the crisp cadence of invading footsteps. The door swung open, and the Alliance commandant stood smiling triumphantly before us.

There are soldiers and then there are soldiers. Fighting men, as a rule, are pretty decent guys at the core. Having experienced danger, violence and the crawling horror of death themselves, they know the meaning of mercy. They respect their foes, and extend a fine magnanimity in the moment of victory.

Lieutenant-Colonel Ras Thuul, commander of the Third Outer Planets' Alliance Flotilla, was not this type of enemy. Half-breed spawn of a Jovian tribal priestess and a renegade Earthman, he retained the worst characteristics bequeathed by each of his parents.

From his father he had inherited height—he towered a full head above the squat, gnarled Jovian "runts" he led—and a festering hatred of the planet Earth. From his priestess mother he had suckled the milk of sadistic savagery which typified Jovian civilization before space-spanning Earthlings carried enlightenment to the far-flung sisterhood of the Sun.

His first words demonstrated clearly how slender was the mercy we might expect at his hands. To Captain O'Hara he said coldly, bluntly, rudely, "Your sidearms, Captain!" Then as the Old Man silently proffered his personal weapons: "You will walk before me, sir, on a tour of inspection. You might advise your men I hold you as hostage. One hostile move from any source means your death."

The skipper's reply was richly disdainful.

"I have surrendered myself to you under the Rules of War, Colonel. This play-acting is childish and altogether unnecessary."

Ras Thuul's swarthy cheeks sallowed; he took a swift step forward and, before one could guess his intention, slapped the Old Man viciously across the mouth with his gauntlet. The heavy, asbestos-lined space-glove cut and bruised; a thin trickle of blood split the skipper's lips.

"One in your position," snarled the invader, "should learn not

to insult his betters! Now, lead the way, Captain. There is much to be done, and no time to waste.

Thus began our painful journey through the conquered *Leo*. As Ras Thuul had said, there was much to be done by his forces—nor had they delayed in getting about their task. A laboring crew was busily engaged in stripping the food-stuffs from our supply bins, other workmen were dismantling all hypo and radio equipment, verifying our belief that the O.P.A. was desperately in need of such material. Grim-faced Jovians had herded our marksmen from the gun embrasures, and were quickly dismantling every piece of ordnance the *Leo* boasted.

From room to room we went, from passage to sector to cabin. Nothing escaped the eagle eye of our foeman. By word and sign he designated to his henchmen those items which were to be removed, those which were to be destroyed. Only in the control-room was everything left untouched. It was here that Ras Thuul volunteered the explanation which proved the depths of his infamy. With a grin of sheer savagery he explained:

“I find it needless to waste energy in smashing this equipment, Captain. I am sure the rocky fragments of the Bog will do that most efficiently.”

The Old Man stared at him uncomprehendingly.

“You—you mean you’re going to wreck the *Leo* in the Bog? Just turn it loose and let the grindstone smash it?”

Ras Thuul shrugged. “It is the easiest way.”

“But—” puzzled the skipper confusedly—“how about us? I mean, are you going to take us aboard your ship, or do we get camped on one of the asteroids, or—”

The half-breed shrugged negligently. “Why, Captain, you wouldn’t want to desert your ship? I’ve always heard you Earthmen made it a point of honor to stand by your decks. Of course I would not think of forbidding you this signal honor.”

The skipper’s face turned white, but it was not fear that drained his cheeks of color; it was righteous rage. His words exploded like a fused hypatomic.

“*What!* You *dare* do a thing like this, Colonel! You accepted my surrender under military covenant—”

“That will do, Captain!” rapped Ras Thuul. “It will do you no good to prate of technicalities. I acknowledge but one rule of war—destroy your enemy! When this vessel has been stripped of its fuel and supplies, I shall turn it loose in the Bog. What happens then to it—or you—is none of my concern. Your pleas are vain, sir!

"And now, have we seen the entire ship?"

It was his selection of the word "pleas" that ended the Old Man's protestations. O'Hara needed no microscope to read our adversary's character; he knew that Ras Thuul would enjoy nothing more than listening to pleas for mercy. If we had to die, we could at least die like men. His jaw clamped forever on argument.

"We have," he said. "We are now where we started."

And so we were, back in the Officers' Mess. A half hour ago our troubles had begun here; now they threatened to end abruptly and, for us, horribly.

But the half-breed's eyes had narrowed. A liar and dastard himself, he had a liar's distrust for everyone else. He nodded toward the closed door on the farther wall.

"We haven't been in there. Where does that lead?"

I said caustically, "No, and there's one mouse-trap you haven't crawled into yet, too. What's the matter? Got a tapeworm? That's just the kitchen."

It sounds right daring now that I see it in writing, but it was pure braggadocio. I figured my number was up, and a few healthy insults wouldn't make me die any deader. But our captor paid no attention. Prodding Captain O'Hara before him, he pushed into the galley.

Of course Captain Slops was on duty. The little guy was a study in technicolor; sort of pink around the eyebrows, white around the lips, and green around the gills. But I had to hand it to him, he was a game little fighting cock. Never a cringe for the Jovian commander, who brushed by him to peer about the cook-house, and, though the runt warriors had taken his massive old Haemholtz when they stripped us all, I saw he had a very large, and a very sharp, cleaver hanging not too far from his grasp.

Naturally, there wasn't anything for our foe to find in the galley. But he went through all the motions, just the same. Squinted in the stove, the refrigerator, the vegetable bins. And finally—

"Ah, ha!" rasped he. "What have we here? A cannon! So, Captain O'Hara—a concealed weapon, eh? Sergeant—"

He wheeled to one of his subalterns. But Andy Laney stepped forward awkwardly.

"It—er—it's not really a cannon, sir," he piped. "If you'll just open the breech, sir, you'll see—Oh! Do be careful, sir! Oh, my goodness!"

Because Lieutenant-Colonel Ras Thuul had hurled open the

breech, and the incinerator-cannon was full—or had been a moment before. Now it was half empty, and the accumulation of slops and refuse as yet unincinerated had dumped backwards all over him!

It was the one bright spot in an otherwise dull day. Thuul howled and bellowed, and that was a mistake because his mouth opened. Then he spluttered. And gagged. And coughed. And backed, slipping and sliding on cold gravy, away from the incinerator. He wasn't the impressive figure he had been ten minutes ago. Coffee-grounds mottled his gold tunic, and lima beans tangled coyly with his once-gleaming epaulets. Potato-peelings draped gracefully from his ears, and the exotic odor of a slightly antique egg exuded from his shirt-front.

Well, what would *you* do? Even if you knew your life was in danger, what would you do at such a moment?

The same as we did, of course. We laughed. The Old Man and I, we burst out in a guffaw and rocked till we almost split our surcingles. And Slops laughed, too, in that piping little squeal of his, though even through his laughter he was gasping spasmodically, "I—I tried to warn you, sir. I'm so sorry! But you see it's only a garbage incinerator."

But he who laughs last, laughs last. And if our foe had been despicable before, he was a raging fury now. He did not even stop to scrape the last clinging turnip-top from his jacket. He spun to his subordinates and screamed, "Come! We are finished here! Back to our ship! I'll show these Earthmen one does not insult a Jovian commander with impunity!"

And his face a thundercloud of wrath, he dashed from the galley. We heard him calling his men, heard them exiting through the airlock, and then—silence again.

It was then, his paroxysms of mirth stifled by sober recollection, that the Old Man turned and said, "Well, it was fun while it lasted. But it's all over now, Dugan. Call the men together. This is the last act, and we might as well all face it together."

But before I could leave the room, Slops clutched my arm with fingers tense and hot as live wires.

"No, Joey! Don't go! I need your help. And yours, Skipper! Hurry! We haven't a minute to lose!"

I stared at the Old Man and he at me. "H-huh?" said the two of us. "Help? Help for what?"

"Oh, don't talk so much!" bleated Andy. "*Work!* Get this garbage out of here—like this!"

And recklessly he plunged both hands into the channel of the incinerator, recklessly hurled it about the previously immaculate floor of the galley. As he worked, he panted: "An incinerator, yes . . . but . . . it was a good cannon . . . in its . . . day. It will still work. I cleaned . . . and oiled it . . . and connected it to the charger. *It still shoots!*"

Shoots! That was all we had to hear. We fell all over ourselves trying to get an armload of that goo. I never thought I'd live to see the day I'd go fond and blissful over a gallon of boiled noodles, but that's just what happened. I dug in, and so did the skipper. In less time than I've taken to tell it, we had that incinerator-cannon empty, swabbed out and ready for use as a cannon-incinerator.

Then the captain clapped a hand to his forehead.

"Omigawd—I clean forgot! The firing-plate! There ain't no vision-field for this gun!"

"Oh, yes there is!" cried Captain Slops. "Over your head, there—the galley-vent. I—I removed the atmosphere-duct and installed a vision-field. Use the crossed wires for a target centering device."

I flung open the vent. As he had said, the vent had been converted into a perfect firing-plate. There before me, a fat and gladsome target, was the largest of the enemy ships which had captured us, the flagship of Ras Thuul's fleet. As I watched, I saw the commander and his boarding party re-enter their own craft.

I said grimly, "Well, it's six against one. They'll blast us out of space, but by the purple gods of Pluto, we'll take at least one of them with us. This thing is connected?"

And I reached for the trigger. But once again Slops held my hand.

"No, Joey! There's a fighting chance we can get *all* of them. Wait till they cut the tractor beams and we're free of them. Then turn the cannon *upward* toward the Belt—"

"Upward?" I repeated dazedly. It didn't make sense. I glanced outside to make sure. Here was the situation. The planetoid Vesta lay about a mile or so below us. Larger than most of the meteoric and planetesimal fragments that comprise the Belt, its orbit was irregular. The smaller hunks of rock—and of course when you talk about "smaller" asteroids that means shards ranging anywhere from a yard to several miles in diameter, with weights ranging from a hundred pounds to twice that many thousands of tons—were whirling and swirling *above* our ships in a tight, lethal little huddle. That, of course, was the *melee* into which Ras Thuul planned to plunge us after he cut his tractor beams.

Surprisingly, it was O'Hara who seconded Andy Laney.

"Do what he says, Joe. I don't know exactly what he has in mind, but it's his pigeon. He's steered us right this far; we might as well go whole-hog."

"Thank you, Captain!" said Slops gratefully. And as he spoke the words, the *Leo* rocked violently. With gathering speed we began to move away from our erstwhile captors, their tractor beams now released. Upward we surged toward the web-work of flailing missiles that spelled pure destruction.

"Now, Joey!" almost screamed Slops. "Aim the cannon at the rubble. Hold it firm. Full strength!"

And I did. I yanked the controls over to full power and aimed the heat-gun straight into the heart of the rubble. The radiation was invisible, of course. Our enemies couldn't know we had an operative weapon. I held it for seconds which dragged like centuries. Nearer we were hurtling toward doom, nearer and nearer.

I cried, "Nothing's happening, Skipper! We're going to crash in a minute. I might as well turn the gun on one of their ships—"

"*Hold it!*" shrieked Captain Slops. "It's working as I hoped. Hold it steady, Joey!"

And now, returning my gaze to the target, I saw what he meant. Something strange and weird was happening—not to us or to the enemy spacecraft, but to the Bog itself! Like a huge, churning kettle it was seething, rolling, boiling! And even as I cried aloud my astonishment, one of the tinier bits of matter plummeted *down* from the overhanging canopy of death to rattle against the hull of Ras Thuul's flagship.

Then another . . . and another . . . and then a large piece. A hunk of rock which must have weighed half a ton. It struck one of the Jovian vessels like a sledgehammer, and a huge gap split in the spaceship's seams. There came signs of frenzied activity from aboard the enemy boat; fire spurted from stern-jets as engineers hurriedly warmed their rockets.

We saw two warships, desperately trying to get under way, ram each other head on. Three more were crushed, beaten shapeless, by the tons of stony metal that smashed their very girders. The last, Ras Thuul's flagship, met its doom most horribly. It was caught as in a vise between two mountainous boulders which rolled tangentially over it. When they separated, all that remained of a once proud ship was a flattened, lacerated shred of tortured steel.

It was then, and then only, that Slops said to me:

"That's all, Joey. You can turn it off now." There was something akin to sadness in his voice. I understood. I didn't feel any too good myself, watching those Jovians, foes though they were,

die so frightfully. "Captain O'Hara, if we can repair the damage done by the marauders, we can now go on to Callisto and complete our mission. I—What's the matter, Captain?"

Cap O'Hara was glaring at his little finger irately.

"Matter? Why, confound it, I cut myself on that tin can. Look at this!"

He thrust before our noses a pudgy paw, the pinky of which was leaking very feebly. I chuckled. Not so Slops; he loosed one horrified gasp, and—

"Blood!" he screamed. "Oh, gracious, I simply can't *stand* the sight of blood! Ooooooh!"

His face went suddenly white. And—just like that!—Captain Slops fainted dead away!

The skipper said, "Well, I'll be damned!" Dazed, he knelt beside the little fellow, fumbled at his jacket collar. "Ain't that the funniest you ever saw, Dugan? Sees six ships scuttled without batting an eyelash, and passes out at seeing a pinprick! Aw, well, it's probably shock more than anything else. I'll unloose his shirt, give him a little air—"

I said, "He's the queerest guy I ever met. But he's a *man*, Skipper."

Then a funny thing happened. The Skipper, strangely scarlet of face, rose suddenly from Andy's side. He croaked, "You—you wouldn't like to lay a little bet on that, Dugan?"

"Huh?" I said.

"On what? I don't understand—"

The Old Man moaned softly.

"Neither do I, Dugan. But you were wrong! Slops, here, ain't no man at all, and never was! He—*he's a girl!*"

Well, looking back on it now I can see how we should have realized it from the beginning. Sure, Captain Slops was a girl! That high, mellow voice . . . the oversized uniform coat . . . that prudishness which was not prudishness at all, but understandable modesty.

Later, as we were streaking the space-ways toward our Callisto rendezvous, the *Leo* completely repaired, we demanded and received an explanation. I might add that in female togs the pint-sized chef looked just the right size, and a hundred percent O.Q.

"I didn't exactly lie about my name," she explained. "It *is* 'Andy Laney'—only you spell it a bit differently. I am really 'Ann Delaney.' My father was a spaceman, so was my grandfather and my great-grandfather. Daddy was always sorry he had a daughter instead of a son. He wanted to see the old tradition of a 'Delaney

in space' go on. But you thick-headed males have rules against allowing women to take to the spaceways except as passengers, so there was nothing I could do."

"You," I told her admiringly, "did all right."

"More than all right!" acknowledged the Skipper. "If it hadn't been for you—Don't worry, Miss Delaney. I'll see that the proper authorities hear all about this. Only—" A crease puckered his forehead—"There's something I ain't yet puzzled out. How come you ordered Mr. Dugan to shoot not at, but above the ships? At the Bog? And how come the rocks came tumbling down that-away?"

"Why," smiled Ann Delaney shyly, "it was really very simple. Heat, Captain."

"Heat?"

"Of course. As any student of thermodynamics knows, heat has a definite attractive force, varying directly as the difference in temperature. Space, being a vacuum, lacks heat entirely. Its temperature is that of Absolute Zero. Our gun emitted a heat-force equivalent to that of ten solar degrees. Thus the radiation we discharged at the bitter cold fragments of rock and ore comprising the Bog created a sort of passageway, an attractive channel down which the detritus was drawn. To state the problem more simply: have you ever watched a pot of beans boil? A seething whirlpool is created; the beans seek the heat."

"By golly!" said O'Hara. "I think you got something there, Miss Delaney. Why—why that's terrific! That gives us a brand-new combat technique for locations where there are small cosmic bodies. Wait till the War Department hears it!"

But Ann Delaney just sniffed.

"New?" she repeated disdainfully. "New? Why, every woman cook knows that, Captain!"

You'll find the rest in the history books. Callisto *did* sign a pact with us . . . the Federation *did* open a new front almost within spitting distance of Jupiter . . .

We've got a better universe to live in now. For one thing, there's peace throughout the Solar System. Because of Ann DeLaney, the government changed its ruling about women in space; you'll find 'em everywhere, nowadays, doing everything and anything men do.

But I'm glad to say Ann isn't one of those void-vampires any more. She and I—oh, sure! We're married now. I couldn't let a swell cook like her get away, could I?



“Postscript to the Future”

Brian O'Shea, this is for you!



The Ultimate Salient

Brian O'Shea, man of the Future, here is your story. Read it carefully, soldier yet unborn, for upon it—and upon you—will one day rest the fate of all Mankind.

HE GLANCED AT ME SLOWLY, AND A BIT SADLY, I thought. “I’m sorry, Clinton” he said, “but that won’t do. It won’t do at all. It will have to be written. You see—you won’t be here then. . . .”

I thought at first he was the census-snoop, returning to poke his proboscis into whatever few stray facts he might have overlooked the first time. My wife was out, and when I saw him coming up the walk, that bulky folder under his arm, I answered the door myself—something I seldom do—sensing a sort of reluctant duty toward the minions of Uncle Sam.

He was a neat and quiet person. One of those drab, utterly commonplace men who defy description. Neither young nor old, tall nor short, stout nor slender. He had only one outstanding characteristic. An eager intensity, a *piercingness* of gaze that made you feel, somehow, as if his ice-blue eyes stared ever into strange and fathomless depths.

He said, “Mr. Clinton?” and I nodded. “*Eben* Clinton?” he asked. Then, a trifle breathlessly I thought, “Mr. Clinton, I have here something that I know will prove of the greatest interest to you—”

I got it then. I shook my head. “Sorry, pal. But we don’t need some.” I started to close the door.

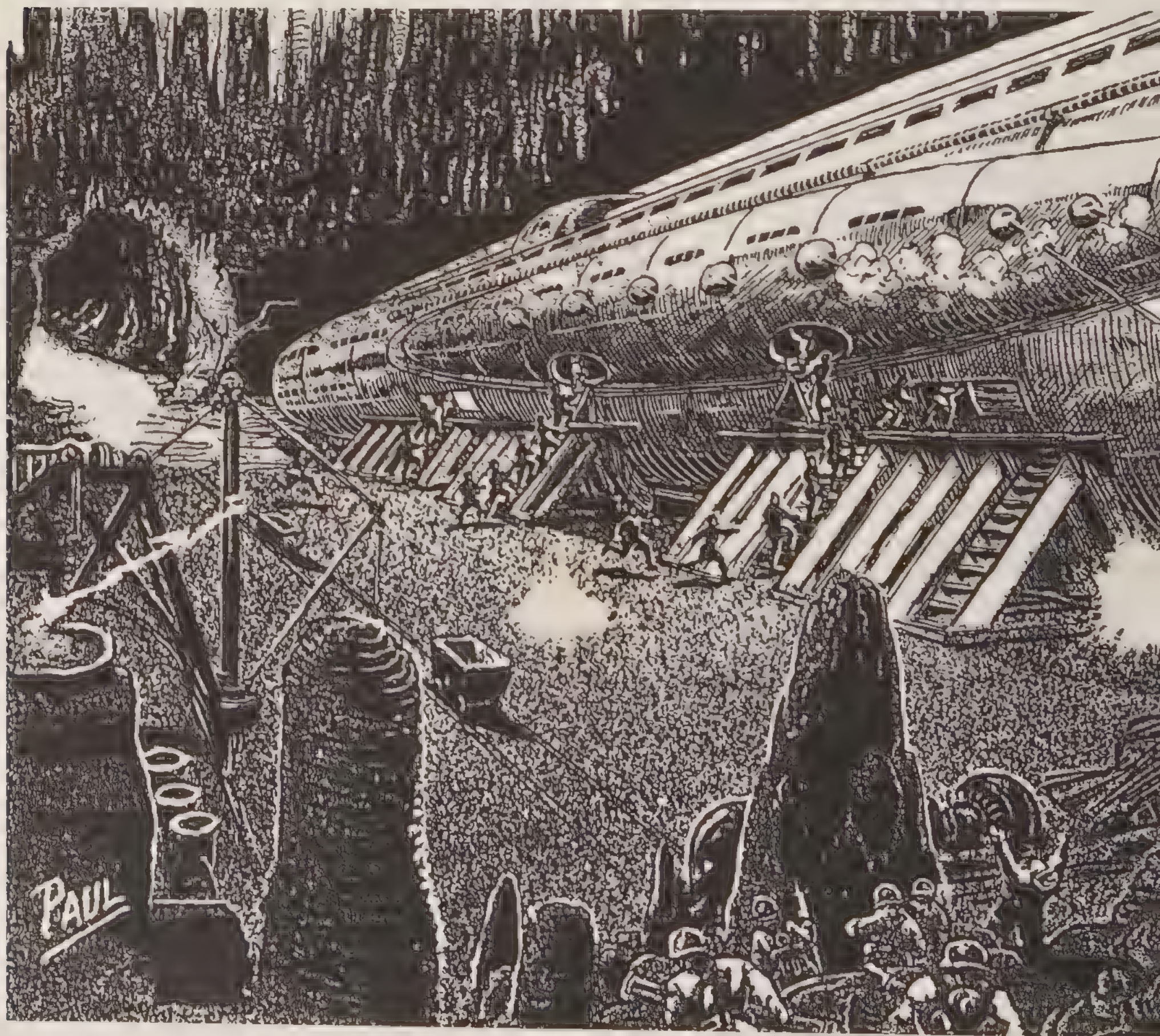
"I—I beg your pardon?" he stammered. "Some?"

"Shoelaces," I told him firmly, "patent can-openers or fancy soaps. Weather-vanes, life insurance or magazines." I grinned at him. "I don't *read* the damned things, buddy—I just write for them."

And again I tried to do things to the door. But he beat me to it. There was apology in the way he shrugged his way into the house, but determination in his eyes.

"I know," he said. "That is, I *didn't* know until I read this, but—" He touched the brown envelope, concluded lamely, "it—it's a manuscript—"

Well, that's one of the headaches of being a story-teller. Strange things creep out of the cracks and crevices—most of them bringing with them the Great American Novel. It was spring in Roanoke, and spring fever had claimed me as a victim, I didn't feel like working, anyway. No, not even in my garden. Especially in the turnip patch. Hank Cleaver isn't the only guy who has trouble with his turnips.





I sighed and led the way into my workroom. I said, "Okay, friend. Let's have a look at the masterpiece. . . ."

His first words, after we had settled into comfortable chairs, made me feel like a dope. I suppose I'm a sort of stuffed shirt, anyway, suffering from a bad case of expansion of the hatband. And I'd been treating my visitor as if he were some peculiar type of bipedal worm. It took all the wind out of my sails when he said, by way of preamble, "If I may introduce myself, Mr. Clinton, I'm Dr. Edgar Winslow of the Psychology Department of—"

He mentioned one of our oldest and most influential Southern universities. I said, "Omigawd!" and broke into an orgy of apologies. But he didn't seem to be listening to me; he was preoccupied with his own explanation.

"I came to you," he said, "because I understand you write stories of—er—pseudoscience?"

I winced.

"Science-fiction," I corrected him. "There's quite a difference, you know."

"Is there?" He frowned. "Oh, yes. I see. Please forgive me. Well, Clinton—" The professorial stamp was upon him quite unconsciously, he addressed me as if I were one of his students. "Well, Clinton, I came to ask a favor of you. I want you to transmit a message to a certain man. I want you to write the message in such a form that it will not be lost—in the form of a fictional narrative."

It takes all kinds to make a world. I gazed at him thoughtfully. I said, "Don't look now, but isn't that doing it the hard way? I'll be glad to help you out. But putting a simple message into story form is—well, why not just let me *tell* the guy? By word of mouth?"

"I'm afraid," he said soberly, "that is impossible. You see, the person to whom this message must go will not be born until the year 1942."

"Nineteen—!" It worked. It threw me off balance for a minute. Then came the dawn. It *was* a gag, after all. My pal Ross being funny from out Chicago way, maybe? Or Palmer, deserting Tark long enough to joyride me over the well-known hurdles? I chuckled. I said, "That's all right, Professor. I'm young; I can wait. Just tell me the name of this unsprouted seedling, and I'll stick around till he gets old enough to talk to. Only the good die young; I expect to live to a ripe old age."

He glanced at me slowly, and a bit sadly, I thought. "I'm sorry, Clinton," he said, "but that won't do. It won't do at all. It will have to be written. You see—you won't be here then. . . ."

You know, it should have been funny. Uproariously, screamingly funny. I should have laughed my crazy head off, given my obviously screwy visitor a smoke and a drink and a clap on the back and said, "Okay, pal. You win the marbles. Come clean, now. Who put you up to this crystal ball stuff? What's the payoff?"

But I didn't, because somehow it wasn't funny after all. There was a deadly seriousness to my visitor's manner; the knuckles of his hands were white upon his knees, his icy blue eyes burned with a tortured regret that was like a dash of water to my mirth.

"I'm sorry, Clinton," he said. "I'm really dreadfully sorry."

I lit a cigarette carefully. In as even a voice as I could muster, I said, "Perhaps you'd like to tell me more? Perhaps you'd better start from the beginning?"

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I think that would be best." He fingered the thick brown envelope nervously. "The story begins," he said, "and ends—with this manuscript. . . ."

"As I have already told you," said Dr. Winslow, "my profession is teaching. Psychology is my field. Recently I have given much of my time to research into the lesser-known faculties of the human mind. Experimental psychical research such as that investigated by Prof. J. B. Rhine of Duke. You are undoubtedly familiar with his work?"

"Extra-sensory perception?" I nodded. "Yes. Most fascinating. The results are far from satisfactory, though. And some of his conclusions—"

"You make a common error," said my visitor gravely. "Dr. Rhine has not assumed to draw any conclusions—as yet. He offers only a few, and completely logical, presumptions."

"Dr. Rhine's studies to date, however, have been in the field of extra-sensory perception only. There are other fields of psychical research quite as untouched, and, I have reason to believe, even more important and—fruitful."

"It is in one of these companion fields that I have been laboring. I have been investigating the phenomenon you may know as 'telaesthesia.'"

"You mean," I asked, "telepathy?"

"There is a difference between the two. Telepathy, as defined by Myers in 1882, is 'the communication of impressions of any kind from one mind to another, independently of the recognized channels of sense.' It implies a deliberate, recognized contact between two minds existent at one time."

"Telaesthesia is a more complex meeting of entities. If A, let us say, reaches out and helps himself to the contents of B's mind *without* the knowledge or assistance of B, that process will be

called 'telaesthesia.' Unlike telepathy, it knows no barriers of Time. There are hundreds of recorded case histories from which we learn of men of our time who have established telesthetic contact with former forgotten eras.

"And of days to come, as well!" Here Winslow's eyes literally gripped me. "But never, until now, has anyone succeeded in gaining more than a fleeting glimpse into the Time stream of the future. Never before has a man established a contact so deep, so strong, that he could read not one sentence or one paragraph of that which is to be—but an entire chapter, decades long. . . !"

It was spring in Roanoke. Outside, warm April sunshine poured down luxuriant gold upon the faint, green buds. My place, *Sans Sou*, lies in a quiet fold between two rolling hills. There was nothing to disturb that quiet now save the boastful warble of a redbird, "Purty! Purty!" and the petulant complaint of a chipmunk in the sycamore.

The sky was a pale, soft blue, cloudless and serene. There were no clouds, and even the delicate fronds of the weeping willow drooped motionless. So it could not have been a storm I heard. Yet as he spoke, a dark shadow seemed to scud across the sky, veiling the sunlight, and the gods made portent in the swell of distant thunder. I felt the short hairs stiffen on my neck, and despite the warmth I shivered.

I said, and why I spoke in a whisper I cannot tell, "Never before . . . until *now*!"

"Until now!" he repeated. And suddenly his fingers were swift with eagerness, he fumbled with the flap of the envelope while words raced from his lips. "Several months ago I began to experiment with automatic writing, one of the means by which telaesthetic contact is authenticated.

"At first the results were—as might be expected—faulty. From the autohypnotic syncope into which I was able to project myself, I woke to find nothing on the sheets before me but meaningless scribbles.

"And then, suddenly, I woke one day to find that in my period of subliminal usurpation I had achieved a definite result. I—or someone—had written four full pages. The first four pages of this manuscript!"

Here he handed the manuscript to me. I had time to notice that the writing was full-bodied, flowing. Then Dr. Winslow's words claimed my attention again.

"That was but the beginning. Once having established contact, it was as though I became the *alter ego* of this mysterious corre-

spondent. From that time on, my experiments were graced with success. Whenever I resumed contact, pages were added to the manuscript. By the periodicity of these, I am led to believe that Brian O'Shea is a diarist, and that through some inexplicable phenomenon, it is given to me to be able to set down, telaesthetically, the very words he writes in his diary—"

"You said," I interrupted, "Brian—?"

"O'Shea," nodded Winslow. "Brian O'Shea. A soldier in the army of the Americas, Clinton—in the year 1963 A.D.! His diary is a history of the things to come!"

What I would have said then, I do not know. Maybe I would have said something bitingly scurrilous—which I most certainly would have regretted later. Or perhaps, as is most likely, I was momentarily stunned into speechlessness. But I was spared the necessity of speaking. Dr. Winslow had risen; eyes glowing strangely, he touched my shoulder.

"I am going to leave you now, so you may read this manuscript in peace. When you have finished, you will understand why I came, and know that which must be done.

"You will find that the manuscript begins abruptly at the moment when first I 'contacted' O'Shea. It ends with equal abruptness. There are fragments missing; these may be filled in or rounded out as you consider necessary for the purpose of storytelling. I have made a few slight changes in spelling. Whether O'Shea was—or should I say 'will be'—a poor scholar, I do not know. The spelling of some words may have changed over a period of trouble-swept decades. . . .

"But whatever surprises lie in store for you, whatever conclusions you draw from the manuscript you are about to read, I beg of you that you play the game of caution. If you end by doubting O'Shea's story, *still* you must convey to him the message the manuscript demands. It is the only way. We must take no chances. I will leave my address—" Here he scribbled a few words on his card; I noted subconsciously that his own handwriting was tiny, crabbed, angular. "When you have finished reading, get in touch with me. No, don't get up!"

For a long moment I stared after him. Is there any way I can tell you how I felt? I, who have written fantasies woven of thin air, now thus to be suddenly thrust into a fantasy beyond my own wildest imaginings? Even more important, is there a way I can make you believe that this is not merely another amusing tale, to be read today and forgotten soon?

The structure of this narrative is mine. I supplied the story

form. But is there any way I can convince you that the words which follow are not my own? *I did not write this story!* It is the story of a man who is not yet born, who will not live these happenings for twenty years.

Here is the story of Brian O'Shea, soldier. . . .

II

—stumbled and pitched to his knees. I ran to his side and would have carried him, but he shook me off.

"It's too late, O'Shea," he said. "My number's up. Take over. And—" He hiccupped convulsively and his lips drooled red. "And for Lord's sake, Brian, get the men out of this trap!"

His eyes glazed, then, and his head dropped forward to his chest. Someone tugged at my shoulder. It was Ronnie St. Cloud; he was screaming, above the splatter of shrapnel, "The hills, O'Shea! They've cut us off from the river. The hills are our only way out!"

Danny Wilson was beside him, and Knudsen, and a few more. About us milled a shrieking, terrified throng; it was impossible to tell soldier from civilian. Our uniforms were anything but uniform. We wore whatever serviceable garments we could salvage. I still had—though I suppose it was unrecognizable beneath a layer of caked sweat and mud—an old khaki campaign shirt, but my breeches were a corduroy pair I had found in a demolished farm house near Sistersville. St. Cloud wore the horizon-blue jacket of *a poilu* beside whom he had fought in Belgium. Knudsen looked least military of all in whipcord riding breeches commandeered from the tack rooms of the Greenbriar Inn at White Sulphur.

St. Cloud was right, of course; we might have known from the beginning we couldn't hold Huntington. It was open to the west, and that entire sector, from Chicago to Detroit and spearheading southward to Akron, Cincinnati, Zanesville, was occupied by von Schuler's Death's Head Brigade.

But Captain Elmon, who had whipped our tiny company into some semblance of order after the debacle at Pittsburgh and had brought us safely down the river through Parkersburg and Gallipolis, had believed we might be able to defend this West Virginia river town until reinforcements could reach us from the Fort Knox garrison.

There was a school here, a Marshall College, with a layout ideal for our purposes. The buildings were more than a hundred years old, sturdily built; there were dormitories, kitchens, private

power plants for heat and light. The campus was encircled by a waist-high brick wall which, sandbagged, made a perfect first-line defense against infantry.

The rugged, mountainous terrain made it impossible for the Toties to bring up mechanized units. Nor could they bring pressure to bear from the Ohio River which, here, was not only shallow but bedded with rubble from the locks and dams we had blown up.

But—the old, old story. They got us from the air. Their Messerschmitts and Junkers descended on us like a host of locusts, bombed the town ruthlessly; small pursuit planes strafed the fleeing populace with merciless persistence. We couldn't do anything about that, of course. Captain Elmon told me once—he saw volunteer service in Sweden before our country got into it—that in the early days of the war, aircraft confined its operations to military objectives. But I laughed; I knew he was just leading me on. He was a great one for joking, was the captain, even in the darkest hour.

Now Elmon lay dead at my feet; his final command had been that I take over. Get the men out of this trap. There was no time to waste in bootless grieving. Already the sharp bite of sidearms augmented the scream of shellfire . . . which meant the Toties were up to their old trick of parachuting an army of occupation into the beleaguered town.

I shouted swift orders to the others; bade them pass the word around to "take to the hills." There were viaducts under the railroad at 16th and 20th Streets; we used these as our ports of egress. It wasn't a matter of minutes. We gave ground slowly, fighting off the enemy advance from street to street, alley to alley, house to house.

By the old football stadium, now an ammunition dump, I found Bruce MacGregor, the Canadian, and the roly-poly Hollander, Rudy Van Huys. They had impressed the services of a dozen scared civilians, were loading trucks, vans, anything with our meager store of ammunition. MacGregor glanced at me sharply.

"Where's the Old Man, O'Shea?"

"Dead," I told him. "We're on our own. Mac, do you think you can handle this job alone?"

"Why?"

"I want Van Huys to forage. We're retreating to the hills. Use the 20th Street underpass, cut south to the Big Sandy, then west at Louisa. Rudy, get all the foodstuffs you can lay hands on. We're heading for hungry country."

They grunted understanding and I went on. They were two good men. The chubby Dutchman could smell out provisions like a beagle. Our men wouldn't starve immediately, anyway.

That moment's delay was the only thing that saved my life. I was but a half block away from the underpass when a Totie bomber spotted the stream of refugees flooding out of the city through that viaduct. My ears sang to the screaming whine of his power dive, concussion threw me to the pavement as he loosed his entire rack full of bombs into the heart of the fleeing throng.

They never had a chance. Those who did not die instantly in the explosion were buried a split-second later in the tons of twisted steel and concrete that cascaded down upon them. There was one moment of dreadful cacaphony, hoarse screams of fear mingling with the thunderous roar of the explosion—then a dull, unearthy silence, punctuated only by the muted whimper of a few charred bodies that could not die and the grating slither of broken masonry filling the chinks of the funereal mound.

I rose, shaken, nauseated. Others had come up behind me; among them was Devereaux. There were tears in the young Frenchman's eyes. He lifted his head blindly toward the sky, shook an impotent fist.

"Les sales cochons! Will it never end, O'Shea, the triumph of these devils? Are honor and mercy dead? Is God dead? My country . . . all of Europe . . . now yours. . . ."

"They haven't taken America," I told him savagely, "yet! Come on. We're leaving town through the 20th Street viaduct. Is that you, Ronnie? What's the news?"

"They've consolidated position along Fifth Avenue, thrown a defense line from Four Pole Creek to the river, infantry advancing north along the river bank to the college. Thompson and a foray squad are trapped in the First National, no use trying to save them. We blew the Toties' brains out, though." St. Cloud grinned ghoulishly. "We had City Hall plaza groundmined. They chose that spot to set up general headquarters."

"Where's Frazier?"

"Dead. Blue Cross."

"Janowsky?"

"Same thing."

"Wilson?"

"He's all right. Or was. He went back toward the college. Said something about having an ace up his sleeve, whatever that means."

I didn't tell him. I didn't have to, for at that moment Danny

came racing toward us. He waved his hand at me in a sort of vague saline or greeting, yelled, "If you're ready to get goin', *git!* There'll never be a better time."

"Why?"

"Because the Toties are goin' to have their hands full in a minute. With something too hot to handle. I just happened to remember that college we were bunked in had its own heating plant. A natural gas pipe-line. Since it was the Toties' objective, I thought maybe I'd warm house before they got there. Hold your hats, folks! There she goes!"

There came a sudden, terrific blast of sound. Even at that distance we felt the shuddering repercussion, felt a breath of superheated air fan our cheeks as the natural well Danny had set off let go with a thunderous detonation. Into the gathering dusk shot a writhing spiral of white-hot flame . . . the jagged outlines of oft-bombed houses looked black and ugly against the searing screen.

The flames heaped higher, higher, spread. An oily pall blotted the dying rays of the sun; from afar came to us the crackling agony of a city destroying itself. I watched, spellbound for a moment, then turned to the others.

"Danny is right. This is our chance. Let's go!"

MacGregor and Rudy Van Huys were waiting for us in the hills beyond the city. We paused to take stock of equipment, count noses, and plan our next move. Of our company—which had numbered six hundred before Pittsburgh, and had been one hundred and sixty-odd at yesterday evening's rollcall—now there remained but fifty-seven men. Twelve recruits joined us from the clamoring mob of civilian refugees. These were, of course, either graybeards, striplings, or men of dubious value as soldiers. All men of fighting age and caliber had long ago been called to the colors by wave upon wave of government drafts.

We were a pitiful collection, poorly fed, inadequately armed, raggedly clad. Even so, the civilians were loud in their demand that we remain with them to "protect" them. But this I could not agree to do.

"You'll be safer," I told them, "hiding here in the hills than marching with us. We'll try to contact Preston's brigade at Fort Knox. You have food, water, radios, medical supplies. Hide out, keep living and—keep hoping!"

And so we left them. They must have numbered three thousand, mostly women and children. A few tried to follow, but I quickened the pace. The last weeping woman abandoned the

pursuit after five miles; I saw her fall to earth, beating the insensate soil with weary, hopeless fists.

Beside me marched Danny Wilson. He was a reckless, devil-may-care lad, was Danny. Even in the thick of battle his ruddy features were habitually wreathed in a grin. But it had deserted him now. He said soberly, "Maybe we should have stayed with them, Brian, boy. It's a hard row to hoe."

"We can't fight a war in small detachments," I told him grimly. "You know that. Mexico tried it, and now their country is under Totie rule. Nova Scotia tried it, and now the swastika flies there. Our only hope is to concentrate, meet them somewhere in one decisive battle."

"I suppose you're right. We go to join Preston?"

"Yes. It's the general concentration point. Elmon got instructions by radio just before he went west. Jackson is bringing up his army from the Gulf, Davies is marching in from Springfield. They say three flights are taking off from Fort Sill; we'll have a small air force. If we can beat the Toties off at Louisville, we'll cut their communications line from Pittsburgh to Cincinnati, hold the Ohio."

That night we slept along the Big Sandy. Before we bivouacked I broke our little company into six squads, each of eleven men, each headed by a veteran on whom I knew I could depend. I appointed Danny Wilson and Ronnie St. Cloud as my lieutenants. In arranging the squads, I tried to place the men according to nationality under one of their own race.

Raoul Devereaux led one of the French squads, while Anatole LeBrun the other. That would have been funny a few years ago, when the army was still organized under the caste basis, because Devereaux used to be a captain and LeBrun a common private. But that old "officer and gentleman by Act of Congress" stuff had gone overboard a long time ago. Now we picked our leaders by their leadership ability.

Ian Pelham-Jones, the Britishier, and Bruce MacGregor headed two English-speaking squads; Rudy Van Huys commanded a group of Dutch and Belgians; the tall Norwegian, Ingolf Knudsen, led a collection of assorted Scandinavians. Norwegians, Swedes, Finns, Danes—Lord, there was a tough outfit!

And so we hit the trail. There's not much use telling about the days that followed. We marched and slept and ate and marched again. We were spotted once by a Totie spyplane; he came down to do a little plain and fancy strafing but we had the advantage of broken terrain. We took to cover and turned his crate into a

colander before he decided he'd had enough. Lars Frynge, the Swedish sharpshooter, claims he punctured the pilot as well as the plane, but I wouldn't know about that. Though it's true that he did wobble as he flew away.

We avoided Lexington, cutting south through Campton and Irvine. We picked up a railroad at Lancaster. Joe Sanders, a native of these parts said it was a part of the old Louisville & Nashville. If it were in operation, he said, it would take us right to our destination. But that was like saying if we had wings we could fly. The rails were twisted ribbons of steel; in some places the roadbed had been so completely eradicated you would never know it had been there.

We saw people from time to time, but mostly in the small towns. They came out to cheer us as we marched through, offered us what little they had in the way of fresh water, barley bread, clothing that would never be used, now, by sons, husbands, brothers, who had fought their final battle. I got a fine new sweater in one village. In another we had an odd experience. A white-haired granddame insisted we accept a flag she had sewn for us. A funny-looking red flag with blue diagonal cross-bars and thirteen white stars. We used it later to bury Johnny Grant. He died of a delayed gas hemorrhage.

The larger towns were deserted. We saw only one man in Danville. A scrawny, long-haired weasel skulking through the ruins of what had once been an A&P supermarket. Bruce MacGregor took a shot at him, but I knocked his rifle up. The bullet whistled over the man's head, and he scurried away like a sick, desperate rabbit. I knew there was a G.O. to shoot all looters on sight, but the time had passed, I told Mac, to concern ourselves with such trivialities. Ammunition was too precious.

And, anyway, if he didn't find the buried provisions, maybe the enemy would.

The seventh night out, we camped in the woods north of Bardstown, just a few yards off what had once been a main highway. I was beginning to smell smoke. Tomorrow we would join the main garrison, get fresh clothing and equipment and be assigned our duties in the projected offensive. That is, I suppose, why I was sleepless.

We had stumbled across a deserted tobacco shed the day before. The brown leaves were old, parched, crumbling, but it was better than the hay-and-alfalfa mixture they had given us up North. I rolled myself a cigarette and was sitting by the side of the

road when suddenly I heard it. The sound of an approaching automobile.

A moment later moonlight glinted on metal; I saw it picking its slow, lightless way over the cracked asphalt. My heart leaped. This must be a car from Louisville. I ran down to the road, stood waiting eagerly. It approached at a snail's pace, but in the gloom the driver must have had all he could do to watch the road without keeping an eye peeled for vagabond troops, for when, as it came beside me, I cried a greeting and reached for the door, there came a startled sound from within, the motor roared stridently, and the car leaped forward, almost wrenching my arm from its socket.

Somehow I managed to hold on, though the automobile bounced and jarred crazily as it struck deep ruts in the roadbed. My head glanced metal and I saw whirling stars. "Hey!" I yelled. "What the almighty hell are you trying to do! Take it easy!"

Brakes squealed; the car jolted to a stop. And from the interior a voice, high-pitched with relief, cried:

"You—you're an American! Thank Heaven!"

Then a slim form collapsed suddenly over the wheel. I yanked the door open, dragging the unconscious driver from the cab. He must be, I thought, wounded. He must be—

But it wasn't a "he" at all. As the body fell back limply over my arm, a campaign hat tumbled earthward. Soft brown hair cascaded from beneath it. The driver was a girl!

I had ammonia tubes in my first-aid kit. I snapped one beneath her nose, jolted her back to awareness. And she proved her femininity by coming out of it with a question on her lips.

"Who—who are you?"

"O'Shea," I said, "commanding a detachment from the Army of the Upper Ohio. Marching to join Preston's brigade at Louisville. But never mind that. Who are *you*? Where do you think you're going?"

She said, "Louisville!" In the darkness her face was a white blur, drab, expressionless, but there was a touch of hysteria to her voice. "Louisville! But haven't you got a radio? Didn't you know—"

We hadn't. It didn't make sense. As she faltered, I snapped, "Know what? Go on!"

"Louisville has fallen. The Toties have taken Fort Knox. Our troops are destroyed, the government has fled, and the Army of the Democracies is in utter rout!"

I stared at her numbly. In the black of the woods a nightjar screamed a single, discordant taunt. . . .

III

The commotion had roused most of the others. Quiet forms in the midnight, they had drifted to the road. Wilson spoke now. He said, "That's the end, then. If she's right, Brian, the war is over. And we've lost."

I said to the girl, "How about it?"

She shook her head.

"I'm afraid so. The last reports I heard, they had seized the Mississippi, cut all contact between our Eastern and Western armies. The Japs control California and Nevada. There was a terrific battle being waged at Albuquerque. The Russian navy holds the Great Lakes. Everywhere you hear the same story."

Pelham-Jones demanded harshly, "St. Louis? Did you hear anything about—?"

"Wiped out to a man. It was caught in a vise. The Germans from the east, the Italians from the north."

Pelham-Jones said, "I see," quietly. He turned away. His shoulders looked heavy. He had a younger brother at St. Louis. Van Huys looked at the girl suspiciously.

"How do we know she's telling the truth, O'Shea? It may be more lies. She may be a Totie spy."

I said, "You have your dent?"

She nodded and handed it to me. I flashed my light on it. It was authentic, all right. The picture on the tiny metal identification tag was an image of her; the name beneath was *Maureen Joyce*. She was tagged as a WAIF, a member of the Women's Auxiliary Intelligence Force. I gave it back to her.

"Very good, Miss Joyce. Sorry. We can't afford to take chances, though. You understand, I'm sure. But—" My curiosity made me exceed my authority. "But what are you doing here? Surely you wouldn't be attempting to escape the Toties in this direction? If they hold the east?"

She hesitated for a moment. Then, carefully, "I am acting under orders, Captain O'Shea. They were supposed to be *secret* orders. But in view of what has happened—" She made up her mind. "It would be better for more than one to know. In case—in case anything should happen to me."

"You've heard of Dr. Mallory?"

"Thomas Mallory?" I said. "The physicist? The one who pestered the daylights out of the government about some crack-brained invention during the early days of the war? Is he the one you mean?"

"Yes. The government isn't too sure, now, that it acted wisely in refusing to listen to his plan. But you know how it was for a while. Miracle men flooded the War Department with fantastic ideas for 'smashing the enemy.'

"Only, in this last extremity, the War Department decided to investigate Mallory's claim. As a last resort, I was commissioned to find him, bring him to Louisville. But now—" Uncertainly. "Now I don't know just what I ought to do. Even if he has a plan, and a good one, there is no one to whom we can communicate it."

Surprisingly, it was Danny Wilson who interrupted.

"Except," he said suddenly, "us!" He turned to me. "Brian it would be suicide for us to go on to Louisville—and there's no place else to go. We might as well make this our job. We have everything to gain, nothing to lose."

"Do you," I asked the girl, "know where Mallory is?"

Only roughly. Somewhere in the hills of the upper Cumberland. I plan to comb the neighborhood—"

The Kentuckian, Joe Sanders, edged forward.

"Don't need to do no combin'," he drawled. "Reckon I c'n help. This yere Mall'ry—he a big man? White hair? Red complected?"

"Why—why, yes. I believe so."

"Mmm. Figgered it'd be the same one. I know him. Usta fish near his place when I was a colt. He come there in the summer-time, big house in Cleft Canyon on Mount Rydell. I 'member we usta call him the 'devil Doc,' 'count of there was alluz queer goin's-on at his place. Well, Cap'n?"

He squinted at me. I weighed the chances briefly. It was probably a wild goose chase. On the other hand, it was useless, as Danny had pointed out, to throw our little force against the might of the Toties who now held Fort Knox. And there was a faint, insane possibility that Dr. Mallory had a 'plan'—an invention, maybe—that would enable us to form the nucleus of a new army that, reorganized, would sweep the invaders from our land. . . .

"We'll do it!" I said. "We'll march at dawn!"

We had to leave the car there on the road and strike out across country. It was the shortest and safest way to Cleft Canyon. Now that the Toties had made a clean sweep of the East, the roads were no longer open to us. As in Mexico five years ago, as in Ontario, the Maritimes, the New England States year before last, as in Illinois last year, floods of Totie scavengers were pouring through the conquered land in a series of "mop up" operations.

Time and again aircraft droning over our heads sent us scurrying to cover. Once a flight surprised us in an open field. That's when we lost Johnny Grant and three other men. Nearby woods saved the rest of us.

Before we abandoned the car, I had the men strip it of everything we could possibly use. Upholstery, tires, all electrical accessories, including the televiser. It was this last that kept us going, kept our spirits aflame with determination, even when the trail was hardest. Wherever we spun the dial we found the ether crackling with the boasts of the enemy; each scene pictured on the plate was one calculated to tighten the already grim jaws of my men.

The Totie banner floated everywhere. It was a blood-red flag; in the center was a quartered circle. In each of these segments was a symbol of one of the four totalitarian states that had welded to form the Totie army. Swastika and crimson sun, side by side with the Italian fasces and Soviet hammer-and-sickle. The Big Four that, irresistibly combined, had ground the principles of democracy under foot.

It made me bitter, but it made me heartsick, too. I could not help wondering how, or why, my father and those of his generation had been so blind as not to see the shadow of the inevitable creeping toward them.

Surely they must have known, as early as 1940, that Sweden would not be the last neutral to be drawn into the conflict? Even then there must have been rumblings in the Balkans, on the Mediterranean? Did they not guess that Italy and Russia were just waiting until the hour was ripe, that Japan's leisurely conquest of China was a mere military exercise to keep Nippon warmed up until the day should arrive for a blow at the Pacific Islands?

My own country was perhaps the worst offender. Had it not been told by a wise man, centuries before that, "In Union there is Strength?" Yet America, like Switzerland and Portugal, Greece and Egypt, played ostrich. Hoping against all sane hope that each succeeding conquest would so weaken the Toties that the few actively fighting democracies could win out in the end.

I remember, as a child, the gleeful shouting in the streets of America when news reached us across the Atlantic that Hitler had been assassinated. I remember my father saying to a neighbor, "That's the last of the mad dogs. Stalin and Mussolini are gone; now Hitler. There'll be an armistice within a month. After that—"

I wonder if Dad ever thought of that when he fought with his regiment at Buffalo. The true facts must have come to him as a series of staggering blows. The sudden collapse of the Franco-

British union when Russia and Italy, selecting their moment with diabolic accuracy of timing, threw their support to Germany. The three mad dogs were dead, yes, but four younger, madder dogs took their place. Himmler, Ciano, Molotov, and Kashatuku. The crushing of India, the rape of Africa, the shadow of the crimson banner stretching across the Atlantic Ocean to touch Brazil.

It was too late then to evoke the Monroe Doctrine. Too late to throw defenses about our own shore line. Canada owned but a shell of its former man power, Mexico was a hotbed of Totie sympathizers. Our militia was unready, theirs fired for twelve years in the flaming crucible of war.

These were not pleasant memories I had as our small band marched toward Mallory's hide-out in the hills. But I could not escape them. I, myself, had witnessed the siege of New York, had seen Philadelphia blown to shards by the mighty Armada that swept up the Delaware, had heard the last, defiant cry of the defenders of Los Angeles—

Unfortunately, here a portion of the manuscript is missing. To Brian O'Shea the events mentioned must have been so commonly known as to render unnecessary the mentioning of specific dates. Dr. Winslow places the probable date of the invasion of the United States at 1959, but this may vary as much as two years, one way or the other.

“—low!” warned Sanders. “I don't think he's seen us!”

Danny's eyes had widened; he was pointing eastward.

“He's not looking for us! There's what he's waiting for. Look! An American plane!”

I was soaked to the skin, cold and miserable. The damned Totie scout might, I found myself thinking unreasonably, have waited just five more minutes before sneaking up over the horizon. Five more minutes and we would have finished fording this stream, would be up the rise and through the tangle of elm that Joe Sanders claimed concealed the place that was our destination.

Beside me, Maureen sneezed. The poor kid was wet, bedraggled. I don't know how she contrived to still appear beautiful under such circumstances. Somewhere behind me, I heard the *snick* of a breech-bolt. I turned in time to find LeBrun raising his rifle. I slapped it down.

“No, you idiot!”

He looked sulky.

“He's low, O'Shea. I can lay one in his gas tank.”

"And if you miss," I hissed, "you'll have the whole damned Totie army down around our ears. We've come this far without being caught. We'll take no risks now."

Still, I knew how he felt. It was rotten to crouch there, knee-deep in icy mountain water, concealed by a vault of foliage, watching one of our planes—one of what must be a very, very few of our planes—drive blindly into the path of a hedge-hopping Totie fighter that had spotted its prey and was now waiting for it.

Then, suddenly, there was the roar of motors. The American plane had come within range. The Totie plane broke from concealment, spun skyward in a swift, dizzying burst of motion. White puffs broke from its nose seconds before our ears caught the spiteful chatter of machine-gun fire.

It caught the American flyer off guard. Something broke from his left wing, flapped crazily in the wind, as he jammed his plane—more by instinct than anything else—into a dive. The Totie was on his tail in an instant. And we stood there, helpless, watching a sweet, if one-sided, air battle.

The Totie plane was superior, of course. But our pilot was a master. Time and again he wriggled out from under the others nose just as it seemed he would be riddled into fragments. Once he managed to climb high enough to try a few shots of his own, but the Totie Immelmanned, was back on his tail before he could even get his sights trained.

It ended as suddenly as it had begun. One minute they were spiraling for position, whirling around each other like a pair of strange, snarling dogs. The next there came a thin streamer of smoke from the tail of the American plane; a streamer that thickened to a cloud as we watched, became flame-shot black, choking, menacing.

The Totie fired a final burst into the damaged plane. It went into a spin. Something dark appeared from a gap over the fuselage, it was the pilot climbing free. For what seemed an endless moment he poised there, then he was a brown chip on the blue breast of the sky, a chip that hurtled headlong to earth. Beside me Maureen gasped; I felt her shoulder tense against mine.

Then a white mushroom blossomed suddenly; I choked a word of profanity that somehow I didn't mean to be profane. The parachute, bloated with air, zigzagged languidly to the ground. The pilot was halfway down when his plane crashed. Flames leaped in a wooded thicket across the rise. The Totie airman circled several times. Then, apparently content, he gunned his ship, disappeared northward.

MacGregor frowned. "They must be confident. First Totie I ever saw who didn't gun a parachuter."

We left our hiding place, then; broke into the open where the caterpillar could see us. He was a good flyer. He sighted us, played his cords expertly, and landed less than an eighth of a mile from where we had gathered. A couple of our men helped him fight down the still-struggling 'chute; he kicked himself loose from the straps and approached me.

"Won't have any more use for that," he said ruefully. "You're the leader here? My name's Krassner. Jake Krassner. Fourth Aerial Combat."

I introduced him around. Danny Wilson said eagerly, "Did you say the Fourth? I knew a guy flew with them. Name of Tommy Bryce. From Hoboken. You know him?"

Krassner shook his head. He had hard, black eyes, a little close. Crisp hair. Broad shoulders. He was a good-looking chap. A little haughty, maybe. But airmen are like that, especially to ground-huggers.

"I'm sorry. Our personnel has changed a lot. Lately," he added grimly. He looked at me. "I seem to have picked a hell of a place to get shot down, Captain. What on earth are you doing in this desolate spot?"

Van Huys chuckled, and Joe Sanders grinned.

"Don't look like much from topside, eh, Krassner? I figured it wouldn't. The old man's a fox. He spent more than twenty years givin' this hideout the damndest coat of natch'ral camouflage you ever seen."

"Old man?" said Krassner curiously. "Camouflage?"

Maureen touched my arm. She whispered, "Maybe you had better not tell him, Brian. It's our secret—"

I started to tell her what the hell. He was one of us, and there were mighty few of us left. We needed all the men we could get. And Krassner looked like a man. I didn't get a chance to say any of this, though. For as we talked, we had continued to follow Sanders. Joe was now picking his way confidently through an opening in the tangle of foliage.

Sunlight dimmed as we entered a huge, cleared space entirely roofed by an interwoven network of boughs. In this space was a wide, rambling, one-story house, adjoined by a number of inexplicable sheds. And on the veranda of the house stood a man I recognized instantly. It was Dr. Thomas Mallory.

IV

Mallory made us welcome. More than that, he seemed positively delighted that we had come. He showed anxiety on only one point.

"No one saw you come here, Captain? You're sure of that?"

"Positive," I told him.

"Good!" He called, and assistants came from inside to lead my men to quarters. I was surprised, as well as a little shocked and disappointed, to discover the number of women attached to Dr. Mallory's household. There were a few men, but for the most part he seemed to have surrounded himself with girls. Not only that, but with young and pretty girls!

But this was no time to sit in judgment on a man's morality. We had an important mission. Maureen broached the subject as soon as we three were rid of the others.

"You must know why we're here, Dr. Mallory. We did not find this place by chance. We came because you are the last hope of our country. Too late, the government realizes it needs the invention you offered it five years ago."

Mallory shook his head sadly.

"I'm sorry, my child—"

"You can't refuse, Doctor!" I broke in. "Don't you understand? The Toties overrun all the Americas. Democracy is dead unless—"

He raised a weary hand.

"Then democracy is dead, O'Shea. Not even I can restore its life. I can say only one thing; I am glad from the bottom of my heart that the government refused to listen to me when first I approached the War Department with my plan."

"Glad? Why?"

"Because I was guilty of that which a scientist must ever dread. I jumped to a hasty conclusion, based on insufficient evidence. My conclusion was wrong, my plan—" He sighed, turned toward a door. "But come. I will show you."

He led the way from his office into an adjoining room; a laboratory, spotless, white-gleaming. About the walls of the laboratory were a number of cages. In some of these were small animals; I saw monkeys, guinea pigs, a squirrel, rabbits. Some were active, eating, shuffling about, looking at us with bright, inquisitive eyes. Others lay apparently asleep.

But these I noticed with some remote part of my mind. For the focal point of attention was a glass-walled case in the center of the

room; a topless case in which lay the body of a man. Maureen started. She said, "Dead, Doctor?"

"He is not dead," replied Mallory somberly. "He is the result of my dreadful error of judgment. These others—" He nodded toward the cages. "—were the experiments that misled me. This man, one of my assistants who trusted me and was daring enough to become my first human experiment, sleeps. How long he will continue to sleep, I cannot guess. But it may be for one, two, or even more decades!"

"Sleeps!" I said. But Maureen, with a flash of that swift intuition I had seen before, guessed the answer. She said, Anaesthesia! That was your plan, Dr. Mallory!"

"Yes, my child. That was my plan. I am a scientist, but five years ago I was sociologist enough to recognize that the United States could not match the power of the Totalitarians. I realized, even then, that the ending we have seen come to pass was inevitable. I set myself the task of finding a way to meet the impending menace.

"I found the answer in a new form of anaesthetic. I will not tell you its formula. It is a dismal failure—but that I did not know. I thought it was a great success. When I permitted small animals—those you see before you—to inhale some of the delicate granules—"

"Granules, Doctor?"

"Yes. It was a revolutionary means of inducing unconsciousness. When I permitted the animals to inhale these granules, they fell into a soft, deep, harmless slumber. I timed their periods of sleep carefully, discovered the anaesthetic rendered them senseless over periods ranging from one to two weeks.

"It was then, heady with success, I offered my plan to the government. It was, I thought, so simple. Our planes would scatter the granules over enemy terrain—" He laughed shortly, mirthlessly. "—and the enemy would fall into deep slumber. While they were thus incapacitated, our men, garbed in specially constructed suits, wearing protective masks, could walk amongst them, disarm them, imprison them. The war would be ended bloodlessly—"

I stared at him incredulously. I said, "But—but if it really works that way, Dr. Mallory, that *is* the weapon we need!"

"Yes, my boy. But it doesn't work that way. I have told you I made an error in judgment. I assumed that Man, being a higher animal than those on which I experimented, would experience the same, or a slightly less drastic reaction than that experienced by the animals. I did not take into consideration the fact that Man is

also a more highly integrated animal. That he is weaker, in some respects.

"When Williamson, here, volunteered to become a human guinea pig, I accepted his offer. I exposed him to the granules. He breathed deeply, fell asleep—" Dr. Mallory shook his head. "And that was more than four years ago. He still sleeps!"

I said, "I understand now, Doctor, why you consider your plan a failure. But you speak as a scientist and a humanitarian who would shudder at seeing thousands of men sleep for a decade. I am a soldier. I have met War face to face, and have learned, by bitter experience, that there is no weapon too dreadful to use if the results are satisfactory.

"What if your granules *do* put the Toties to sleep for years instead of days? Isn't that better than seeing our countrymen die beneath the sword of the aggressor? Unless we act swiftly, this war is over. Freedom, liberty, equality of men, all the things we believe in, are doomed. But there is yet time to equip a few of our troops with the suits and masks you speak of, turn loose your slumber-granules to the winds.

"Even though thousands of our own men share the sleep of the enemy, we can go through with the disarmament program you planned. When our foes awaken, a decade hence, they will have lost their leaders and their war. When our friends waken we will take them, triumphantly, to the homes and cities we have rebuilt while they slumbered."

Dr. Mallory said, "I wish it were as simple as that, O'Shea. But there is one other thing you do not know. The granules that are my anaesthetic are more than mere granules. They are spores. Worse—they are self-propagating spores!"

He pointed to a trebly barred and locked door opening on one wall of the laboratory. For the first time there was nervousness in his voice.

"There is a storeroom beyond that door, O'Shea. In that storeroom, quiescent in sterile containers, lie spores. Countless thousands, millions of them. They are the granules I made for the government before I discovered their real nature. There lies beyond that door a weapon potent enough to end this war immediately—"

He paused suddenly. We had all heard it, the squeak of a worn hinge, the shuffle of a footstep. I motioned Mallory to silence, tiptoed to the office door and flung it open.

The aviator, Krassner, stood there. He was smiling, he said, "Ah, there you are, Captain! I was looking for you. I wanted to ask if—"

"How long have you been here?" I asked angrily.

"How long? Why—just a minute or so. I—"

"Were you listening to our conversation?"

He stiffened; a flush highlighted his cheek bones.

"I beg your pardon, sir!" he said.

"Because, if you were—" Dr. Mallory was beside me, his hand was on my arm. I hesitated. There was no sense in being so violently suspicious. I said, "Well, never mind. Go back to your quarters, Krassner. I'll be with you shortly."

"Very good, sir!" He saluted, turned and stalked from the office, a picture of affronted honor and dignity. I felt somewhat ashamed of myself.

Mallory said, "It really doesn't matter whether he heard us or not, O'Shea. What I was about to say is, there lies beyond that door a weapon potent enough to end the war immediately—but it must never be used. For once loosed to the winds, those abominable spores would not only end this war, they would still all animal life on the face of Earth. I have said they were self-propagating. Each new generation of spores would deepen the slumber into which mankind had been soothed by the first—"

I said, "But why keep them, Doctor?"

"I don't quite know, O'Shea. Perhaps I have done so because I am, at heart, more emotional than a true scientist should be. Perhaps I have a secret fear that there may come a day when I shall be forced to play God, give mankind its release from the chains of the tyrant."

Maureen shuddered.

"No Doctor! You mustn't even think of that. Things look black now, but they can't go on like this forever. Right and truth and liberty will prevail in the end. There must be some other way to escape—"

"There is," said Dr. Mallory quietly. "There is another way. A plan I have been working on ever since the failure of my first. There is one last refuge to which they cannot follow us."

I said, "I don't understand, Doctor. Do you mean Antarctica?"

His grave eyes captured, held mine.

"No," he said. "A place more remote than even that. I mean, O'Shea—the moon!"

I knew, then, suddenly and with a great, overwhelming despair, that our journey to Cleft Canyon had been a vain one. As a last resort we had sought the hidden laboratory of one who had been a great scientist. We had found a madman.

I said, "Maureen—" and I suppose there was regret in my voice.

But Mallory stopped me, "A moment, O'Shea. I'm not insane. Nor is my plan—as you undoubtedly think—impossible. Did you ever hear the name of Frazier Wrenn?"

The name was vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place it. Maureen could, and did. She said, curiously, "Isn't he the traitor who disappeared from Earth with a group of followers? Years ago? From a laboratory out west somewhere?"

"Yes, my dear. In 1939. From Arizona. But whether he and his tiny band were traitors is something future generations must decide. Wrenn hated war; foresaw what must come of Earth's second Armageddon. He fled Earth, his destination was the planet Venus, his purpose to maintain, on that wild colony, a vestige of culture and civilization until Earth's feverish self-destruction should end."

Mallory sighed. "We do not know what has become of Wrenn's expedition. There has been no remotest sign, no signal—"

I said, "Venus! But, Doctor, that means *spaceflight*."

"Yes, Brian. I was to have been a member of that gallant party. But I was delayed in reaching their Arizona rendezvous, and their departure was hastened by an unexpected attack. They left without me. But, fortunately, Wrenn had confided in me the plans for his spaceship. For years, now, with what scraps of metal I could steal from a war-ridden, metal-hungry humanity, I have been secretly building a small duplicate of the *Goddard*.

"You wonder where it is hidden? Our Kentucky hills conceal great caverns, Brian. There is one beneath the hill on which this house stands. Below us—as I will show you shortly—is a gigantic cave. In it is my almost completed craft."

I had not noticed that Maureen's hand was in mine until I felt its soft whiteness tense within my grasp. She cried, "But why the moon, Dr. Mallory? Why not follow the Wrenn expedition—?"

"You ignore a major factor, my dear. Celestial mechanics. Wrenn's flight was planned for a time when Venus and Earth were in conjunction. Such is not the case now. Earth approaches the Sun, while Venus is at aphelion. And my craft is, as I have said, but a small copy of Wrenn's. Moreover, I have been able to collect only a small amount of fuel.

"There is only one body within our cruising range—Earth's moon. It is my dream that we shall go there—"

I had been listening silently, stunned. Now I came to my senses.

"No, Doctor! I can listen to no more. You forget I am a soldier of the United States army."

"The government has fallen; the last of the democracies is crushed beneath the conqueror's heel, Brian, lad."

"It will rise again. In the hinterlands—"

"—are Totalitarian troops."

"There are still eighty million Americans—"

"And a hundred million aggressors!" He put a hand on my shoulder. "Don't you see, Brian, this is how you can best serve your country? Make this flight with me. We will take your men and my followers—two score men and the women you have already seen—and form a colony on the Moon."

"We will return, then, secretly, for more Americans. And more, and more. We will transfer our democracy to a new soil, there grow in strength and power and wisdom until some day we can reclaim our heritage."

Despite my training, I could not help but be convinced! I said, shaken, "But astronomers tell us the Moon is a barren, lifeless world?"

"For the most part, it is. But the Caltech telescope indicates that air still lingers in the depths of the hollow craters. And in underground caverns, water can be synthesized. It will be no easy existence, but it will be—"

"The ultimate salient!" breathed Maureen at my side. "The last line of defense for freedom's children! Brian, Dr. Mallory is right! We must do this thing!"

He looked at me hopefully. "Well, Brian O'Shea?"

I took a deep breath. "When does our flight depart?"

V

At Dr. Mallory's suggestion, I did not tell my men too much about our plans. "With so much at stake, O'Shea," he said, "the less they know the better it will be."

But they did not ask to know much. They were good men; they trusted me. And if they chafed a little at the enforced idleness of the next week, the rest must have been a welcome surcease from months of fighting. Only one man failed to share their calm acceptance of my orders. Krassner. He told me, sulkily, "There's something going on around here, O'Shea. And, damn it, I have a right to know what it is. As a fellow officer—"

"I respect your brevet, Krassner," I told him somewhat curtly,

"but for the present I must ask you to remember that you are attached to this division through courtesy only, and have no authority. In a few more days, now, I will be at liberty to explain everything."

He had to be satisfied with that. Though it was the nature of the man to be snoop; several times he was observed prowling around the grounds, searching some clue as to Doctor Mallory's well-concealed secret.

He was chasing a will-o'-the-wisp, of course. A man might have searched for months without finding the entrance to Mallory's underground workshops. Mallory admitted Wilson and St. Cloud, my lieutenants, to his confidence. He took us to the cavern wherein was being constructed the spaceship.

The gateway to the depths was that which appeared to be a photographer's dark-room. Once inside, Mallory pressed certain carved ornaments, the entire farther wall slid back, and there stretched before us a smooth, well-lighted passage leading downward at a gentle incline.

We must have followed this more than a half mile before we debauched into the main cavern; a mighty, vaulted chamber, a huge bubble of emptiness blown in the solid mountain centuries ago when Earth was in the travail of making.

But it was not this natural wonder that made me gasp. I had seen others; I had, indeed, once taken refuge for four weeks with the Ninth Artillery in Luray. That which brought an exclamation to my lips was the shimmering monster braced on an exoskeleton of girders in the middle of the chamber. A gigantic, tear-shaped rocketship, stern jets lifted some feet off the ground, streamlined nose pointing at the roof of the cave.

About it, in and around it, sweating men fretted, worried, labored, like so many restless bees. Here the brief chatter of a riveting machine woke snarling echoes as a final plate was welded into place; there a master electrician wove an intricate network of wires into some obscure purpose. In still another place, a strong-thewed gang trundled seemingly endless trains of supplies into the ship's capacious holds.

Dr. Mallory smiled at the expressions on our faces, and there was pardonable pride in his smile.

"There, my friends," he said quietly, "is the *Jefferson*."

"*Jefferson?*" repeated Maureen wonderingly.

"Named for him who, in our country's infancy, wrote down in blazing words the principles on which all democracy is based. The inherent right of men to enjoy life, liberty, and the pursuit of

happiness. Once his words showed us the way. Now his name shall lead us to a new civilization."

"Amen!" said Danny Wilson piously. Then, "Now can we have a look at her? I mean *him*, Doctor?"

Knowing every nook and cranny, berth and hold, turret and gun-chamber of the *Jefferson* as I do now, it is hard to remember my feelings on that day when first I strode her permalloy decks. Even so, I can recall the vast wonder that engulfed me as Dr. Mallory led us through the ship, pointing out the engines, the control-rooms, the Spartan simplicity of the living quarters, the well-equipped kitchen and compact storage bins. There was much I did not understand until long afterward. Permalloy itself was a novelty to me. The metal had been invented, Mallory said, by a German scientist. One of the old school. A Doktor Erik von Adlund.

"I do not know what has become of him. Perhaps he, like the other peace-loving greats of his race, has long since been liquidated by the Totalitarians."

So said Dr. Mallory sadly. And he tried to explain the operation of the small, inconceivably powerful, atomic motors, the invention of Frazier Wrenn. It was a concept so novel, yet so simple, that it staggered us all. But I could see how, without first having a knowledge of the heretofore unknown element *inektron* (*the spelling of this important word seems to have confused Brian O'Shea. In the manuscript it is incomprehensibly scribbled. Dr. Winslow suggests the philological similarity of such words as "inertron" and "inactron"?-NSB*) man might never have discovered the long-sought power of the atom.

St. Cloud, frankly at sea as regarded scientific matters, was delighted with the military efficiency of the ship. I could see his fingers yearning for the lanyard of one of the rotor-guns installed in the fore and aft turrets. He liked, too, the foreman who came over to meet us.

"How many men have you working here below?" he asked.

Myers, the supervisor, told him twenty-three. "And there are twenty women topside," he grinned. "Doc says we're going to a brutal frontier. But if the women can stand it, we can. A man can do lots of impossible things with his wife at his side."

I understood, then, the number of girls I had seen above ground, and regretted my hasty judgment of Dr. Mallory's character. I might have realized that he did nothing without purpose. He had seen—as I saw now—that without something, *someone*, to

fight for, the men of our little colony-to-be could easily lose heart. He was assuring our venture against all eventualities.

I was glad, suddenly, that Maureen was beside me. I wondered if she felt the same way.

Danny Wilson voiced a problem that had puzzled me.

"But this cavern, Doctor? Aren't you like the man who, in his spare time, built a yacht in his cellar? How are we ever going to get this monster out of here?"

Mallory said placidly, "When the hour comes, we will burst from this cavern like a moth from its chrysalis. You have not yet witnessed the power of our atomic beams.

"One thrust of blinding energy from the forward jets and we will shear an exit through the tons of solid rock and earth that now conceal us. Before we leave—" He looked at me significantly. "—we will destroy the buildings above ground. Including that one, sealed chamber that no man must ever open.

"The Totalitarians will have no way of guessing who we were, what we did here, or where we have gone. And even if they should guess, they would be powerless to follow us."

His voice was low, vibrant, anticipatory.

"Your men and mine, Brian O'Shea, we hundred odd will establish the first base on Luna. Then there will be other trips to Earth, gathering more converts to our cause. The day will come when we will match our conquerors in strength. And then—"

I said thoughtfully, "One more thing, Doctor. The *Jefferson* is supplied with water and provisions, yes. But if our number grows, we will need our own farms and granaries. How are we to grow food in the lightless grottoes of the moon?"

He nodded sagely.

"All that has been provided for, Brian, lad. I have overlooked nothing. Chemical culture is possible. Trust me to take care of that problem when it arises."

Danny Wilson coughed apologetically. He said, "We do, Doc. But—but I think I know what's in the back of Brian's mind. Suppose something should—I mean—if anything might happen to you—?"

"That, too, I have considered. There is a complete scientific library in the aft turret. Science is no secret to the man who can read and think."

Danny's face lighted, he said beautifully, "A library! Golly! Books! I haven't seen a book for nigh onto fifteen years. Except Field Code manuals. There hasn't been much time for reading lately."

"And that," said Mallory darkly, "is perhaps the greatest catastrophe of this war. Reading men, thinking men, are happy men. They are not concerned with the lust for conquest of anything save the unknown. Yes, Wilson, there are books. And for those who seek light entertainment there are even volumes of fiction. Magazines for amusement."

"Magazines?" I said, puzzled. "Magazines for amusement? I don't see anything funny in an armament warehouse."

Mallory sighed.

"Forgive me, O'Shea. I had forgotten your youth. There was a time, when you were a toddling child, when 'magazines' were not always ammunition bins. Publishers used to issue monthly periodicals, printed on paper, bound in bright jackets, filled with stories. Exciting adventures in sports, the West, tales of crime and its detection, fictionized hazards as to the future of the world—

"Ah, but that was long ago. That was when paper was cheap and common. When the vast mills of Norway and Denmark and Canada poured endless rolls of pulp into our country."

Danny said eagerly, "I'd like to see some of these here 'magazines,' Doc. Could I?"

"You may. Myers will help you select some from the storage bin, Wilson. And now, my friends, if you are ready to return to the surface—?"

That, as I recall, was on the 29th day of July, 1963. Yes, I know it was that day, because that was the date of the fall of Santa Fé. We watched that battle through our televises; it was triumphantly broadcast—a braggart deed in keeping with their boastful ways—by the Toties.

Albuquerque having fallen, General Bornot, commander of the Army of the West, had withdrawn his forces to the old capital of New Mexico, there to make a last, desperate stand.

It was a valiant, but doomed, defense. The very fact that intimate details of the battle were televised shows how vastly superior the Totie forces were; their airplanes could fly without hindrance over our lines, spying out resources, reserves, and the pitifully weak remnants of our Army.

Like our own demolished Eastern army, the westerners were a motley crew. I saw French, English, Scandinavian and Canadian uniforms; loyal Sikhs from India fighting shoulder-to-shoulder with kilted Scots; swarthy refugees from Totie Mexico and Guatemala defending futile breaches beside blonde, fair-skinned Icelanders.

The main body of attackers stormed up from captive Albuquerque to the south; these were the trained warriors of Japan, the yellow horde that had ravaged California, Arizona and Utah and pressed eastward to meet Kievinovski's command. The Russians came down from the north, cutting off any avenue of escape through Taos. ("Once," Dr. Mallory told us sadly, "Taos was the artistic center of the United States. Now but one pigment flows there; the red of blood.") And Schneider's Army of the Mississippi had swept westward through Arkansas and Oklahoma, leaving nothing but waste and desolation behind them, to meet the other armies at this last defense post of democratic gallantry.

It was no battle at all, really; it was a slaughter. Our army had refortified old Fort Marcy, earthworks built by General Kearny more than a hundred years ago. Two divisions were quartered in the Garita, the old Spanish headquarters. Thus they lay, more than four thousand Democratic troops—waiting behind breastworks of earth and 'dobe for the attack of armies whose artillery was built to blast steel and concrete pill-boxes out of existence.

Even so, the gallantry of their defense turned the blood in my veins to electricity. They did not wait for the Toties to attack; they carried the fight to the enemy. With the first, tentative shot from the besiegers there came an answering blast from the besieged. Then the bedlam was on.

Stream upon endless stream, the Toties flooded into the city. As they did so, we—and the enemy—discovered that the spying televise had not told the whole story. Windows opened to expose spitting, snarling machine guns. Doorways gaped to expose light fieldpieces that poured fiery death into the Toties. Fake walls split miraculously, from them charged concealed troops of Americans, faces grim, guns flaming, roaring, bayonets flashing.

Guerrilla warfare became the order of the day. At street barricades powder and flame were forgotten as men met face to face, looked with stark eyes upon dripping steel. Americans and their allies fell, but for each of them fell two, three, a half dozen of the invaders. The scream of explosives was deafening, the street pictured on the metallic screen before us was a shambles of blood; bodies lay asprawl like the forgotten toys of a careless child.

And—the televise screen went blank!

Danny Wilson loosed a great cry of joy. "They're licked!" he roared. "The dog-whelped cowards are licked! I never knew of them to turn off a televised victory—"

For five glorious minutes we shared his hope. Then the broadcast was resumed, after a murmured comment about a "technical

difficulty in transmission"—and when again our eyes looked upon the streets of Santa Fé, the picture had changed.

Once more it was aircraft that had won the day. In the face of impending disaster, the Toties had loosed the full power of their air armada against the beleaguered forces. It did not matter to them that their thermite bombs fell amongst their men as well as ours; that was a hazard their hirelings had been trained to accept. Burst after flaming burst rocked the streets of old Santa Fé, broken bodies were flung brutally against shattered walls, doorways and windows emptied—and there were no more defenders. Only fresh, unending troops of Toties filling the gaps left by their fellows.

I saw the Garita fall, a flaming shambles; I saw an airplane swoop low over breastworks hastily flung up at the *Puerta de Los Hidalgos* and wipe out a company of Americans. I heard the biting rasp of machine gun fire, the staccato bark of anti-aircraft; once the visiplat before us whirled giddily for an instant as the plane in which our broadcaster rode narrowly escaped disaster.

I saw the last great moment of Fort Marcy; the fall of the gates and the horde of snarling Toties that rushed in, bayonetting all before them; I saw the bayonet wielded that slashed the rope holding the American flag to the flagpost. I saw the man who turned and raced to that flagpost, grasped the ropes and held them taut as, for a moment longer, the tattered ensign whipped out through the smoke and flame.

Then I saw the bullet that found this unknown hero's breast; saw him cough and loose his grasp, slip earthward as the flag above him tumbled to the dirt. There was a look of hurt surprise in his eyes. Then I saw no more, because my eyes were wet. And Dr. Mallory said, "There is nothing more to see—"

And turned off the televise.

Yes, that was the 29th day of July, 1963. I remember it well. For it was after that I asked Mallory, "Do we go now? There is no reason to delay."

And he said, "We will leave in five days. By that time all will be in readiness. And the third of August will be a day of good omen. It was on that day, centuries ago, that a humble Portuguese sailorman with a great dream sailed westward to the Indies and found a new world.

"Like Chistofero Colon, we will select that date to set our course for New America—"

Maureen's hand tightened on mine. Krassner, who had been watching the televise silently, gaped at us.

"New course? Go? Go where?"

"Skip it—I" I began. But Dr. Mallory stopped me. "No, I think it is well the men should be told now, O'Shea. My helpers know. Your men, who must be the fighters of our party, should be told where they are going."

And he told them. It came as a stunning blow. Some of them looked frightened; some, to be quite truthful, simply did not understand. Others were openly incredulous. Among these was Krassner. He expostulated, "But—but, O'Shea, this old fool must be insane! Flight to the Moon! Absurd!"

His eyes narrowed.

"There's more to it than that. This is a trick of some kind. I'll bet it's tied up with that mysterious invention you've got hidden in your closet—"

I grasped him by the shoulder, whirled him about.

"Then you *did* hear us that day?"

"Sure. I heard you. Is there anything wrong in that? I couldn't help hearing you say you had a weapon that would end the war. If that's what you've got, trot it out! That's a lot better than dying like rats on a fool's expedition to the *Moon*!"

"Luna! Pah! I for one won't have anything to do with it—"

I said hotly, "You damned fool, we can't open that closet. Don't you realize—?"

"Brian!" snapped Dr. Mallory.

I shut up suddenly. Krassner looked at me, then at the old man suspiciously. He snarled, "You reminded me once that I had no authority over your command, O'Shea. Well, now I remind you that you have no authority over me. I'm pulling out of here. I've had enough of this insane secrecy and—"

He started for the door. I said only one word.

"Lars!"

Lars Frynge, the towering Swede, had his revolver at Krassner's midsection. He said amiably, "Ay tank maybe you batter lissen to Captain, hey?"

Krassner's face purpled. He bellowed, "This is the last straw, O'Shea. Insulting an officer and an equal! By the gods, I'll—"

He was right. He was an officer and an equal. But I was determined of one thing. Go with us he would, whether he liked it or not. But in the meanwhile—

"All right, Lars," I said. "Krassner, I'm sorry. I wasn't just trying to throw my weight around. But think it over carefully, man. This means a lot to all of us. You're at liberty to do what you will."

He snorted and strode from the room. Danny Wilson cocked

an eyebrow at me; I nodded. Danny followed him. Maureen said nervously, "He's a trouble-maker, Brian. I don't think we should trust him out of our sight."

"That's why Danny left us," I grinned. "And when we go, we should leave without him."

"That," said Mallory, "is impossible. When we go, there must remain no one behind to know where we have gone."

And there were five days left in which to finish all that had to be done before our departure. Those were days of feverish excitement and activity for all of us. Having been let into the secret, my men were shown the way to the underground cavern. There they labored, side by side with Mallory's helpers, to load the cargo, put the last finishing touches on the *Jefferson*.

We stripped the house; we gathered all forage from the barns, and silos and bins. We rolled cask upon cask of fresh spring water into the holds. We locked and sealed the holds, one by one.

Danny raised a fuss about that. He had found something new and wonderful—something I meant to investigate myself as soon as the opportunity permitted. The joy of reading fiction.

"It—it's swell, Brian!" he told me. "Boy, I wish I'd lived in them days when magazines was common. You ought to read some of them stories. Sports and detective stories and—" He looked sort of sheepish. "The ones I like best are science stories. Gosh, you'd be surprised, Brian. Them old writers guessed sometimes pretty near what was going to happen."

"There was a guy named Bender, or Binder, or something like that, who guessed 'way back in '40, at the start of this war, that we'd get into it. And there was another guy named Clinton who said the same thing—he was nuts, though. He said the women would bust loose from the men and set up their own government."

"And those others, they predicted things like the spaceship we'll soon be riding in. And television, and—"

I said, "Those magazines must be plenty old."

"They are. Ancient. But they're still fun. Brian, can't I sneak a few of them into my berth instead of sealing them up in the library? Do you think Doc would mind?"

"I guess not," I told him. So he did just that. By the time he'd finished robbing the library, it looked moth-eaten and there was scarcely enough room in his berth for him to turn around in . . .

Those were full days and exciting ones, but pleasant. It is hard to realize that we were living on the bright edge of grave calamity.

Nor did we know it until the eve of the day on which we were to take off.

It started with a thin, high droning to the north. The familiar drone of aircraft. As always, under these circumstances, Dr. Mallory sounded the "Take cover!" signal, and everyone scurried to the shelter of the camouflaged grove, there to wait until the danger should pass.

But it did not pass. The droning came nearer, deepened in tone. And we saw, through the leafy veil that concealed us, that it was not a single plane that was approaching, nor a single flight—but a solid phalanx of enemy aircraft!

Even then we did not guess the dreadful truth. It was not until they had come directly over us, swung into an involute loop and began concentrating upon us, that we knew what was happening. Then we saw something dark and ominous loose itself from the rack of one bomber; a thin screaming filled the air—and in the woods to our right there came a frightful blast!

Earth shook beneath us, Maureen screamed needless words in my ear.

"They're bombing *us*, Brian! They've found our refuge!"

VI

There was only one thing that spared all of us in those next few minutes. That was the fact that the Toties did not know *exactly* where we were. Somehow they had learned the approximate location of Dr. Mallory's mountain hide-away, but not in vain had the aged scientist spent twenty years nurturing plant life to form a perfect barricade of concealment about the dim, squat buildings. From above, the wooded dell that hid his laboratory must have looked like one of thousands such.

Therefore they scattered their shots. One bomb exploded a quarter mile from Mallory's house; I learned afterward that it killed two workmen who had been laying in cordwood. Others exploded as far as five miles away as the hive of lethal wasps eddied back and forth, bombing the entire countryside with abandon.

A thousand questions seethed through my brain, but there was no time now to ponder the answers. No time to ask why, or how, the Toties had learned of this place. I seized Maureen's elbow, half-led, half-dragged her toward the laboratory. Above the crashing din I howled in her ear, "To the cavern! That's the only safe—"

The rest was lost in an ear-splitting thunderbolt. But she knew what I meant.

We were not the only ones who fled to the security of the house. The lab was the lodestone toward which all we tiny, helpless motes gravitated. By the time we reached it, the shaking walls were jammed with soldiers, workers, women, who had sought refuge there.

A few of these were itching for action. Such a one was Danny Wilson. He was pleading with Mallory, "How about it, Doc? Just one of them anti-craft guns? We can get it up here in no time."

"No. They don't know just where we are, Wilson. A shot would locate us definitely. We must remain silent and take our chances against a lucky placement."

Krassner, his handsome face oddly pale, clutched at Mallory's arm.

"This cavern you were talking about, Mallory. Take us there! We'll all be blown to bits—"

Joe Sanders' nose wrinkled, he looked at the airman disgustingly, and spat. Mingled with my own contemptuous reaction to Krassner's demand, I felt a warming glow of pride in my men. Each of them had realized, as had Maureen and I, that the only safe place was the underground shelter. But each of them had wanted, before we took to that refuge, at least one vengeful poke at the enemy. Quivering capitulation like this rubbed them the wrong way.

But Mallory, serene as ever, had already led the way to the secret entrance. He pressed the knobs, the door swung open. I was beside Krassner as he did so; I saw the look of surprise on the aviator's face as he saw the long tunnel that fed to the depths beneath. I couldn't restrain the taunt.

"Thought Mallory was insane, eh, Krassner? Does this look like the work of a madman?"

He muttered something incoherent. Then Pelham-Jones, whose squad had been quartered farthest from the main house, burst into the room excitedly.

"They're landing foray parties, Brian! How long will it take to get everyone out of here?"

I glanced at Mallory. He said, "Fifteen or twenty minutes, at least."

"And to get the *Jefferson's* motors started?"

"Another ten."

"Then," I snapped, "you'll need protection for a half hour. That's what we're here for. Bruce, Rudy, Raoul, split your squads.

Send half below; have the others throw a cordon about the laboratory. If they're dropping infantry, they'll have to stop bombing. By the time they find us, the others will be below. Then we'll take to the cavern—"

"Very good, sir!" They sprang into action.

The women continued to file singly into the small darkroom, pass through the doorway into the tunnel. Maureen clutched my arm.

"Brian, you don't have to stay up here. You're too important. You're the leader. You've got to—"

"—to stay with my men!" I told her quietly. And I did what I had been wanting to do, but had never before dared. I took her, unresisting, into my arms; kissed her. Her lips were warm against mine. Then I pushed her toward the doorway. "Get down there. Don't worry about us. If we hold our fire it will take them a long time to locate us. Danny, where did Krassner go?"

Danny grimaced.

"That yellow mutt? Don't ask me. He's probably down there by now, hugging a stalactite."

"Well, to hell with him. Let's get going. And don't forget—don't fire a shot unless they actually see us. We don't want to give our position away."

Mallory said quietly, "I'll herd them below as fast as I can, Brian. When you hear the signal, bring your men on the double. But before you leave the laboratory, you know what must be done?" He nodded significantly toward the inner room, toward the trebly-barred door that contained a world's fate. I nodded.

"I know."

The steady evacuation continued. I went outside again. As Pelham-Jones had reported, the Toties were parachuting infantry to the ground. More planes had reached the scene; the sky swarmed with them. And a mass occupation was in progress; from each transport tumbled a steady stream of dark figures that, like strange, winged insects, plunged out of their humming cocoons, hurtled headlong toward Earth for a moment—then suddenly grew filmy, white umbrellas that lowered them gently to the ground.

It was a random, haphazard occupation for the Toties *still* had not solved the secret of our exact location. But many—too many—were dropping near our sheltered grove. It would not take them long, I knew, to find us.

Happily, the aerial bombardment had ceased with the drop-

ping of the infantry. That was good. No chance explosion would find the heart of our refuge, destroy the lab and cut us off from the underground cavern.

Approximately twenty of us remained above ground as defenders. I told MacGregor, "Encircle the house. Defend it at all costs until you hear Mallory's call—then hightail it for the tunnel. I've got something to do inside."

I went back to the door beyond which were concealed the lethal anaesthetic spores. There were two barrels of oil there; we had placed them there for the purpose I now carried out. I broke them open, spilled their contents every which way. Now a single match would set the house ablaze, destroy forever the danger Mallory had feared. I would strike that match just before ducking into the tunnel myself—

A single, explosive crack sounded outside! A rifle had spoken!

That ripped it! With that shot there came a moment of macabre silence; then the air was alive with an answering volley from the hills and woods surrounding us. I raced out of the house, found Rudy Van Huys. I roared angrily, "Who fired! Why? Good God, man, don't you realize—"

His pink, chubby cheeks shook with anger to match my own. He said, "I don't know, Brian. They hadn't spotted us until then. But now—"

He didn't need to point to the forest; I could see the grey-green uniforms sifting through the trees, closing in on us. The *spang!* of a Wentzler shrilled in my ears, spent lead splattered against the wall behind me. All about us, now, rifle fire rasped and spat; I saw an advancing Totie soldier stop short in his tracks, stagger, spin, and fall, clutching his stomach with red hands that clawed. I heard a grunt from one of the men beside me, saw his mouth form an astonished O and an ugly, purple-black third eye appear magically in the middle of his forehead. The back of his head. . . .

Then came a welcome sound, a cry from Mallory.

"All clear, O'Shea! Bring your men!"

They came on the double. Not all of them. Half of them, maybe. Those few minutes of gunfire, raking our fearfully exposed position, had cost us. MacGregor, huge bear of a man, staggered around an ell of the house carrying a still figure. Danny Wilson. I cried, "Mac, is he—?"

"Bad, Brian! Mighty bad." MacGregor lumbered into the house with his burden; the rest of the men followed him, lingering to throw last shots into the advancing force before they disappeared.

There remained, still, my most important task. Now the Toties had apparently brought up several pieces of light artillery, for mingled with the snap of musketry I heard the familiar coughing bark of ordnance. Once the house shuddered and quaked, concussion deafened my ear drums as a shell found us. But I sped down the empty corridors toward the lab. Time was precious. All too soon the Toties would close in on the house; before that I must toss my flame, race back to the tunnel entrance.

I burst into the room, at last, and—

—and stood aghast! I had only presence of mind to throw a shielding arm across my face, hold my breath. For no longer was the closet sealed. The bars had been smashed inward, the lock was a shard of broken metal, the door a heap of splinters. The gods of chance had tossed a die for our enemies. That shell I had heard—had found its way into the granary of death!

I had a momentary glimpse of the inside of the closet. I saw grey, fungoid granules sifting through the broken door; a cloud whirled and eddied toward me. To breathe that cloud meant oblivion. Beating at my clothes, my hair, with suddenly frenzied fingers, I turned and fled from the room.

In the hallway I stopped, ignited the box of matches I carried, tossed the blazing brand onto the oil-soaked floor. Flame licked hungrily along those stained boards; the bright fire-flower grew before my eyes. Even so, I knew my effort was in vain. The shell had entered through the walls of the house, and even now I could see those spores of slumber sifting out to float with the winds.

An agonized cry brought me to my senses. Mallory's voice, "Brian! Brian, lad—where are you!"

I turned and fled toward the secret portal. I made it just in time. The aged doctor and I were the last to enter the tunnel as the first Totie set foot in the laboratory. Stumbling, panting, we raced down that smooth slope to where the *Jefferson* awaited us. A dull throbbing wakened echoes in the hollow depths; eager hands helped us into the air-lock.

I heard Mallory gasp, "Take off! *Now!*" The humming deepened to a frightful roar, the Niagara of powers beyond comprehension. I was dimly aware of a cascade of broken rock smashing down about the *Jefferson's* permalloy casing, of an unearthly sheet of flame mirrored through quartzite windows. Then a tremendous tug pulled me to my knees, my lungs strained for precious air, blood danced before my eyes and there was agony in my bones. . . .

VII

Earth was a tremendous disc, swaddled in lacy veils of gleaming white, when next I looked upon it from the control turret of the *Jefferson*. I did not look for long. I had, when I turned my gaze upon it, some vague idea of being able to determine (if nothing else) broad continental outlines of the sphere from which we were roaring at a speed which Mallory had told me was approximately 25,000 miles per hour.

But the sheen was so terrifically blinding that I had to shut my eyes. Dr. Mallory, no longer so intent over his instruments now that he had checked his course and found it satisfactory, noticed the movement, reached over and turned the pane through which I had been looking a quarter-turn in its grooved frame. Immediately the burning radiance dimmed into murky grayness.

"Earth-shine, Brian," he answered my unspoken query. "Our mother planet is a great reflecting body. At this distance it is even more painful to look upon with the naked eye than is the sun."

Maureen said, "But the moon, Doctor? We don't seem to be moving toward it?"

"We aren't. It's moving toward us. Or perhaps I should say both it and we are moving toward a mutual point in space where our paths will intersect in—" He glanced at a chronometer and at his calculations. "In a little less than eight and a half hours."

"Before that, however, Brian," he turned to me seriously, "there will be a few minutes that I am afraid will be rather uncomfortable for our party. The period of absolute weightlessness when we reach the 'dead spot'; the spot where the gravitational forces of Earth and its moon are completely nullified by each other."

"You might go below and warn everyone that this is to be expected. Bid them not to be alarmed."

Someone coughed apologetically at the turret door. It was St. Cloud. His face was granitelike, but his eyes were haggard. He said, "Brian—"

"Yes?"

"It's Danny."

"Danny? Is he—?"

He nodded. "I'm afraid so. He'd like to see you."

I followed him swiftly down the ramp, through the corridors, and into the sick bay. There were a half dozen of the men in there receiving first aid treatment from one of Dr. Mallory's assistants.

Wilson was in one of the private wards off the main hospital room.

He turned his head slowly as I entered, essayed a grin that froze, suddenly, as a spasm shook him. But he said, in a low, husky voice, "Hyah, Cap!"

I said, "Hyah, yourself, soldier!" and motioned the others to get out. The door closed softly behind them. "Got a blighty one, did you?" I said.

He said laboriously, "You wouldn't kid a guy, would you, Brian? I got a west one this time." His hands plucked at the sheet covering him, drew it down. Even the bandages had not been able to staunch that slow, staining seepage. I drew the cover back again.

"You're tough, Irish," I told him. "You'll get over that one before breakfast."

But I had a hard time saying it; the words rang false from my lips. I was lying, and he knew it as well as I. He shook his head.

"I don't much give a damn, Brian. I got the guy who done it, and a couple others for good measure. There's only one thing I'm sorry about."

"Yes, Irish?"

"That story. It was about a guy named Kinniston. A Lensman. He was in a hell of a jam. I'd like to have known if he got out." He said plaintively, "I can't lift my hands, Brian, boy. They're so damned weak. . . ."

I said, "One of those magazines? Where is it?" He nodded to the chair beside his bed. I picked the thing up, found the place where he'd left off. I started reading to him the story that had captured his fancy. It wasn't easy. I hadn't read much of anything since I left military training school at the age of thirteen. A lot of the words were unfamiliar, and I guess I made pretty heavy weather of it.

But he seemed to be enjoying it. He lay back on the pillows, breathing hard, so intent on the adventures of this "Gray Lensman," printed in an old and yellowed fiction book, that he almost forgot the icy fingers closing in upon him.

He only interrupted me once. That was to say suddenly, "Brian—it was Krassner, you know."

"What?"

"He fired . . . the shot."

The shot that had betrayed us! I was reminded, forcibly, that I hadn't seen Krassner aboard ship. I didn't know whether he'd made it or not. But if he had—

"Go on . . . Brian. Get him out of trouble before. . . ."

So I read on. It was weirdly strange, sitting there reading a story of spaceflight adventure written twenty years ago. While we, ourselves, soared the void in a craft bound for Earth's satellite. But I read on. And it must have been ten minutes before I sensed something wrong. At first I couldn't figure what it was. Then, suddenly, I realized. It was the fact that Danny's breathing no longer rasped beside me. . . .

I rose and closed the magazine. I hope that somehow he knows, now, how the Lensman fought his way out of that jam.

I went back to the turret, then. But on the way I sought out Ronnie and Mac and Rudy. I asked them about Krassner. They hadn't seen him.

"But we will! If he's aboard this ship, we'll dig him out!"

They were gathering their squads into search parties as I left. In the control room, Dr. Mallory had just completed another check-up and minor course revision. He was jubilant because the *Jefferson* was reacting so beautifully. "Another six hours, Brian, and we'll be there. I've been teaching Maureen to operate the ship. She's an apt pupil."

Maureen flushed with pleasure. Mallory continued, "I'm glad we have another pilot. Now she can make the next trip back to earth, pick up more colonists while we build our Lunar colony—"

I started, and looked at him swiftly. Then he didn't know! I said, "Doctor—those spores. How swiftly do they propagate?"

"With drastic swiftness, Brian, lad. That's why I kept them in a sealed, sterile chamber. Had they ever been loosed, within two month's time all Earth would have succumbed to their somnivorous power. But why do you ask—?" A sudden look of fear swept his features; his voice rose.

"Brian! You destroyed the spores? I saw flames leaping before you entered the tunnel—"

And then I told him.

It took him a good while to speak again. And when he spoke, his voice was deep with sorrow. He glanced at the dim shadow of earth outlined on the polaroid window, and his hands made a yearning gesture.

"That which I feared most has come to pass. We are powerless to prevent it. We might have time for two, three, a half dozen trips to Earth to save a few refugees from the sleep to come—but even that is unsafe. Were a single spore to get into the ship, be borne

back to Luna, our colony, too, would be stilled in centuries, aeons of slumber. You're sure the spores escaped, Brian?"

"I'm sure."

"Then soon we will be the last of Earth's waking children. Our responsibility is graver than ever. Now must we not only keep alive the spirit of liberty, but all man's dreamed-of future is in our hands."

Maureen cried desperately, "But the responsibility is too great, Dr. Mallory. Surely you, who invented the spores, know some way to counteract their action? Isn't there some way to effectively destroy them?"

"None, my dear. None . . . except . . ." His eyes dimmed uncertainly. "I don't know. Maybe. There's a faint, far possibility. Once, as I was experimenting, I happened to expose certain of the spore-plasm to synthetic chlorophyll. A reaction took place, a sloughing of the spore cell. I was not interested in that at the time, so I didn't pursue the experiment. But it is remotely possible . . ."

"We must try, then," I told him. "As soon as we get to Luna, you must try that experiment again. Try it on your sleeping assistant, Williamson. Better he should die now than slumber on forever in his glass coffin."

"And if the antidote works, we'll be in a position to reclaim Earth. Sweep away the plague, and while doing so, end the war in the very fashion you once planned."

"I'll do it!" he cried excitedly. "Chlorophyll must be the answer! As soon as we reach—"

He stopped abruptly. Footsteps were pounding up the runway; breathless men were tumbling into the room. Big Mac was at their head, his brow was red with unbridled rage. He yelled at me, "Brian! We've found him! We've found the dirty, skulking rat!"

"Krassner, you mean?" I thought again of Danny, and of those others who had died because of Krassner's revealing gun shot. My anger flared to match MacGregor's. "Where is he? Bring him in!"

"We've got to take him. He's barricaded himself in the aft storage compartment and threatens to blow the ship to hell if we make a move!"

VIII

For a moment, everything before my eyes was outlined in crimson. As from afar I heard my own voice gritting, "Get your men together! Follow me—"

Then Dr. Mallory's sharp command, "No, Brian! Don't move hastily. He has the upper hand. He can do just what he threatens. Those aft storage bins are loaded with explosive, inflammable substances. Maybe we can reason with him—" He turned to Maureen. "Hold the ship to its course, my dear. I will be back in a few minutes."

We moved aft. Mallory and myself, MacGregor and Jan Pelham-Jones, Devereaux. We passed through the bulkhead that sealed the forward from the aft portion of the ship, hurried down a long corridor, and came to the carriage lock beyond which lay the storage bins, the engineers' berths, the recreation room and the library.

This door was closed; before it, tense, nervous, uncertain, hovered a dozen of my men. Van Huys headed them; he looked up at me, his pale blue eyes troubled.

"He's in there, Brian. I think the man's gone mad!"

Mallory raised his voice, called mildly, "Krassner?"

There was a shuffling sound from behind the lock. A moment's silence, then Krassner, suspiciously, "Well?"

"What's the matter, my friend? You mustn't act like this. What is it you want?"

"Turn the ship back to Earth!"

"But we can't do that." Mallory's voice was soothing, persuasive. "We've set our course. We can't return."

"You must, damn you!"

I couldn't restrain myself any longer. I brushed by Mallory, cried, "Krassner, you're acting like an idiot! Come out of there immediately!"

Again there was a brief instant of stillness. Then Krassner's tone altered subtly, became half-mocking. "Is that you, O'Shea?"

"Yes."

"The gallant captain of a drag-tailed company. You want to save your command, don't you, Captain? Then make the old fool turn this ship back, and do it now!"

Wrath inflamed me; I stepped forward and hammered on the metal door. There came the sound of swift, frightened movements inside. Krassner yelled sharply, incisively, "Don't try to come in here, O'Shea. I can blast this ship to shards, and by the Banner, I'll—"

He stopped abruptly, aware that in his excitement he had finally given himself away. But if he was startled, I was even more so. Suddenly, now, it all made sense. I wondered why I had not guessed the truth before. But I am not a clever man; I am just a

soldier. And we had met Krassner under circumstances that favored his deceit.

I said, slowly, "So you're not one of us, after all, Krassner? You're one of them?"

He had recovered his aplomb. He laughed stridently. In my mind's eye I could see his face, thin lips drawn in a tight smile, those too-close eyes lifted at the corners with mockery. His voice was a taunt.

"Congratulations, O'Shea, on having played the dupe so long and so excellently. Allow me to introduce myself in my proper character. Captain Jacob Krassner of the Imperial German Army—at your service!"

It was all too clear, now. I remembered the day we had met Krassner, seen him "shot down" by an enemy plane. I remembered MacGregor's comment at the time. "Damned funny. First Totie I ever saw who didn't gun a parachuter."

And that day I had caught him listening to us from Mallory's outer office. His restless wanderings around the laboratory grounds; now I knew he had been seeking the hideaway of the *Jefferson*. And the betraying rifle-shot—

"You Americans are a naïve race," Krassner was saying amusedly. "It never occurred to you; did it, O'Shea, that I might have concealed on me a portable transmitter? It was I who exposed the location of the laboratory to our gallant forces. We had suspected for some time that strange things were brewing near Cleft Canyon. That is why I—shall we say 'dropped into the picture'? To learn the meaning of certain things that puzzled us."

He was a braggart, like the rest of them. Now that he had given himself away—only Toties swore "by the Banner"—he was gloating triumphantly. And he held the upper hand. We could not even tell him that which we knew; that Earth was doomed, that already hundreds of thousands of his compatriots as well as ours by quiescent in dreadful, sleeping undeath. If he discovered the Totie cause was lost—well, they were ever ones for the heroic, the vainglorious gesture. And his hand controlled forces that would blast us all into nothingness.

I glanced about me nervously. The faces of the men mirrored my anxiety. Mallory's brow was heavy with fear, Van Huys gnawed his full lower lip savagely. Only the gleaming metalwork of the corridor was impassive; that and the heavy door that barred us from a traitor and an enemy. A grilled square, high in the walls of the corridor, was like a great, fanged, laughing mouth. I stared at it.

"Mallory!" I whispered the name. "What is that?"

"Eh?" He followed my glance. "Oh—that? Part of the ventilation system. But, why—?" Then he grasped the reason for my sudden eagerness. "Yes, Brian. It feeds into every chamber. We'll give you a hand. Bruce—"

Krassner's voice came to us, suspicious. "What are you whispering about out there? I warn you, don't attempt to enter this room. If you do, we'll all die together!"

Mallory somehow managed to keep his tone steady.

"Krassner, you're an intelligent man. Listen—"

"Keep him talking, Doctor!" I whispered. I nodded to MacGregor; his huge hands cupped to give me a hand-up to the grill. My fingers tore at the four studs that bolted it into position. One came out. Another. All eyes were upon me as I lifted the heavy grill from its position, lowered it into the outstretched hands. Only Mallory continued talking, pleading, arguing, reassuring. Stalling for precious time.

I nodded, MacGregor's shoulders heaved, and I was scrambling into the smooth bore of the ventilating system. It was narrow, but not too narrow; the air was cool, clean-smelling. I crept from the opening, was lost in darkness.

A native sense of direction, keen-edged by years of guerrilla warfare, aided me in threading that black labyrinth. How long the creeping journey took, I had no way of knowing. It seemed endless, for I moved slowly, cautiously, dreading the revelatory scrape of clothing upon metal, the sound that might send Krassner suddenly into action.

A turn, a rise, a descent, and another turn. Then before me loomed a networked square of light. And the sound of Krassner's voice was no longer muffled; it reached my ears loudly. "—fine organization, O'Shea, where the soldiers address their 'captain' by his first name. But we will teach you obedience, you Yankee upstarts! We—"

I was at the grill. There was no way to unscrew it from the inside. What could be done must be done—and in a single, sure move—from here.

Krassner stood a few yards from the barred and bolted door. He had not been bluffing. He had prepared the way for the destruction of the *Jefferson* in the event his demands were refused, his scheme went awry. The end of a coiled fuse lay beside him, he toyed nervously with an electro-lighter as he talked. But now his patience was wearing thin. He said, "But enough of this conversation! Are you, or are you not, going to turn about? Your answer now, or by the Banner—"

Mallory answered reluctantly, "Krassner, once more I beg of you to listen to reason."

"The time for reason is past. I want action. You, O'Shea! Speak to me! Are you going to turn the ship?"

Silenced I eased my revolver from its holster with infinite slowness. I saw a puzzled look appear on Krassner's features, turn to a look of sudden doubt.

"O'Shea! Where are you? Speak to me!"

My gun spoke for me.

Krassner never suffered for the misery he brought on others. He never knew what struck him. My shot crashed into his brain like a Jovian bolt. Without a word, a whimper, a groan, he collapsed where he stood, his lips still parted in the question he had been hurling at the door upon which, now my comrades were battering.

But even in death, Krassner was destined to throw a last blow amongst us. My cavernous eyrie echoed with a roaring blast; when my deafened ears could hear again they heard a sizzling crackle. The stench of burning powder stung my nostrils.

I craned to look down through the grill; saw there that which damped my forehead coldly. Krassner's weapon had been the hand flame-thrower of our enemy. The stricken convulsion of his fist had shot a withering blast of flame upon the fuse. Now a charred line of fire was racing to the charge Krassner had prepared.

In frantic haste I screamed this knowledge to those beyond the door. "You've got to get in somehow! Stop that fuse!" Their efforts redoubled. I heard the ringing crash of metal upon metal which meant they had brought up a pry, then came a hissing sound, and at the doorjamb, by the hinges, metal warmed, turned orange, glowed cherry red. A blowtorch!

I could do no good behind this grill. It was the act of a contortionist to turn in that meager space, but somehow I accomplished it, scrambled desperately toward the corridor grill through which I had entered the air-duct.

It was just as I gained the opening that the hinges of the lock finally gave way, the door burst open. Even I was not prepared for that which appeared through the frame. The entire aperture was one solid sheet of flame. Despite their eagerness, no one could blame my men for falling back, horrified, from the scorching fingers that leaped out to grasp them.

All but one! And that one was Dr. Thomas Mallory. Perhaps it was because he alone realized the vital necessity of jerking that fuse from its charge before everything ended in one coruscant

moment. Arms locked before his face, head lowered, he dashed recklessly into that flaming hell!

I fell—or dropped, I know not which—from my outlet, found myself on my feet, heard myself bellowing, “Water! We’ve got to stop that fire before—”

But they knew that. Already someone had raced to the jets, another was tugging desperately at a reel of fire hose. I suppose what I did next was heroic. Either that or damned, blind foolishness. It could not have been deliberate heroism, for there was no time to measure the chances, weigh the consequences. I leaped through the doorway, followed Dr. Mallory. And even so, there was another figure at my side. That of burly Bruce MacGregor.

We found him at the same time. He lay face down on the floor, arms outstretched before him. But in one blistered hand was—the end of the fuse. Scant inches from its charred end stood piled boxes of Triple-X, most deadly of all explosives. The flames had not yet quite reached it, but in another moment—

Then the water came! Like a solid fist it caught me in the middle of the back, shot me, sprawling, forward. The breath shot from my lungs before that impact—but never had I been more grateful for a bruising blow.

MacGregor, a sorry sight with his blistered cheeks, scorched hair, spark-charred garments, bent his brute strength against the flood, roared directions.

“Here! On these boxes first! Soak them, ruin them! We can fight the fire later.

We got Dr. Mallory out of that furnace. How long we battled the fire after that is hard to say. At least an hour. Krassner had planned his coup with deadly Teutonic thoroughness. Not only had he arranged the fuse and explosive charge; he had also soaked walls, drapes, furniture, with gasoline.

Against this, our water was useless. We had no sand. Men labored to drag the lethal crates of explosive out of the danger zone; after that we went back at the everspreading fire. Chemicals did the trick, finally. The last blaze succumbed to the stifling blanket of carbon dioxide, a cleanup crew methodically swept up the last of the charred débris.

Thus died Krassner—but at what a cost! Ten of my men in the hospital, at least two of them seriously burned. Three whole bins of provisions gone forever, devoured by the hungriest of all foes. A binful of linens, clothing, blankets, burned to cinders. And every other room that had been in that aft section of the ship gutted!

All these disasters paled into insignificance when, bandaged, cleaned, reclad, I went to visit Dr. Mallory. One look at his face and I knew that here was the heaviest price we were to pay for the destruction of our last mortal foe. Only Mallory's eyes were visible under the swaddling mask of bandage, and these were raw and bloodshot. But the ghost of a smile lighted these fine old eyes, and his voice, sieved through a layer of gauze, said weakly:

"I . . . reached there in time Brian, lad."

"You did that," I told him huskily. "You saved us all, Doctor."

"Not only us, but . . . mankind. We *had* to live, Brian. You must lead . . . our people . . . out of the wilderness."

I said, "Not I, Doctor. *You*. You are the only man who can save us, reclaim the sleeping world—"

He said, as though not hearing me, "It's a good . . . thing I showed Maureen how to run the ship. Isn't it? Now she can take us to Luna."

"Brian, boy . . . find the notes . . . in my desk. They'll help you. I believe . . . you'll find the crater of Copernicus the best place to land. There will be air there. Thin, maybe. But air. In the underground grottoes . . . should be water. . . ."

A spasm shook him; his eyes closed for a moment in pain, then opened again. They were febrilely bright.

"Most important of all . . . Brian . . . the spores. You must find a way . . . to destroy them. Go back to Earth . . . and awaken man . . . to a new, a peaceful, world."

He was silent so long that I cried out, "Doctor!" I couldn't say more.

But, he spoke again, and for the last time. "I am sure now . . . Brian . . . you will find the answer . . . in chlorophyll. Keep after it. The fate of all . . . mankind . . . is in only your . . ."

And that was all. His eyes closed, then, as if they had finally found peace. I turned away. Maureen covered his face tenderly. She came to my side, and her voice was soft.

"He was right, Brian. You are our leader now. It is up to you to find the antidote for Earth's illness."

I stared at her long and bitterly. My voice must have been harsh.

"I! I, Maureen? Tell me—do you know the formula for chlorophyll? Do I? Does anyone aboard this ship, now *he* is gone?"

"Don't be upset, Brian. No, we don't—but there's no cause for despair. It, and everything else you need know, is at our disposal. That's why he went to such pains to provide a scientific library

for the ship. All man's knowledge lies there, waiting for us to seek it out."

I took a deep breath. I said, "That's just it, Maureen. I couldn't bring myself to tell him. But—"

"But, Brian—?"

"The library is gone! The books that meant life or death for mankind are a pile of crumbled ashes!"

I suppose I should be grateful that we are here. I should, be thankful that Maureen's quick intelligence made it possible for us to land here at the crater of Copernicus. I look from the window of my little shack. I see shanties like my own arranged in a crude circle here at the base of towering mountains.

Dr. Mallory was right. We have air here, and water. We have enough provisions to last us for years. By the time those are exhausted, we will be independent of our Earthly supplies, for already Sanders and Van Huys have set soil into cultivation; they claim, gleefully, that this thick, rich, Lunar soil flowers like a desert when watered. And we have set up plants for the synthesis of water.

Strange how quickly we have adapted ourselves. We even laugh sometimes, nowadays. There have been marriages; I suppose that means that in a little while there will be births. Imagine that! The first Earth child to be born on the Moon.

I, too, should be happy. At times I am—comparatively. For I have Maureen beside me; our love is a great, sustaining force in a desperate existence.

But I cannot be completely happy, for night or day I am reminded of the great, impossible burden that weighs my shoulders low. The Earth, a massive, glowing globe, lights our sky. Occasionally I think I can glimpse the gleaming ocean waters of Earth; once, on a clear night, the familiar outline of our lost homeland, America, was crystal clear to our eyes.

Yet all life on that nearby mother planet is, must be, now deep in everlasting sleep. Everlasting because I am powerless to interrupt it. Because Mallory's library is no more; because I am a stupid soldier, not a clever man.

Only recently there came a wan ray of hope. It was as we were transferring the last pieces of furniture from the *Jefferson* to our shacks. In the berth that had been Danny Wilson's—gay, laughing Danny!—I found pile upon pile of those amusing, colorful "magazines" that Danny loved.

They are old and ragged; many of them are coverless. But most

of them—for such was Danny's preference—are the kind which Mallory once called "science fiction." Dreams of the world-to-be, pathetic in the face of that which now confronts us.

But it is my only ray of hope, these magazines. I brought them to my shack. I am culling them carefully, one by one. There is a faint, and oh! so faint, chance that . . .

Yet I fear it is a hopeless search. There is so much of fancy in these little books, so little simple fact. Had but *one* of those imaginative writers of years ago thought to include in one of his stories that which must have been, to him, a commonplace formula—that for chlorophyll—I could yet do that which Mallory demanded of me. Here we are rich with ores, the soil teems with every element known to man. We have a well-equipped laboratory, we could synthesize *anything*. But we cannot create this "chlorophyll" because we do not know what it is, nor what elements combine to form it.

Hope dwindles as I read. There remains but one more slim pile of magazines before me. If the answer is not in one of them, then we must perish. I turn pleading eyes to the past, to the year 1940, before I was born. But there is no one to hear my plea. Unless, in one of these remaining—

(Here the manuscript ends.)

POSTSCRIPT

Common sense tells me there can be little doubt but that this "manuscript," purported to be written by one Brian O'Shea, a soldier in the Army of the Democracies in the year 1963, A.D., is a deliberate and painstaking hoax.

Who is responsible for it, I cannot begin to guess. Somehow I can't bring myself to believe that Dr. Edgar Winslow (whom I have investigated and found to be exactly what he claimed, a fellow in the psychology department of one of our nearby Southern universities) would lend himself to such a fantastic trick.

But it is hard to believe, also, that Winslow could and did achieve the perfect telaesthetic rapport evidenced by the foregoing pages.

But—there was an earnestness about Winslow that stirred me strangely. He did not have the air of a man perpetrating a fraud. He asked me, you will remember, to "play the game of caution," even if I did not believe that which I found in the manuscript.

I should, perhaps, dismiss the whole thing with a shrug; heave the "story" back at Winslow with the advice that if he wants to

become a science-fiction writer he should do so honestly, not try to insinuate his way into print on the byline of another.

Yet—it is a queer manuscript. It is quiet here in Roanoke today. As I write, I look from my office windows to see the rolling hills, now sweet-breasted with fresh green, misted with the soft white of dogwood. The sky is blue and clear, the sun a warm beneficence. Still, the morning papers tell of the desperate plight of the Allies. Again they have lost ground to a grim, mechanized Totalitarian army. Finland, Norway, Belgium, Holland, — the list grows.

Mussolini has sent his restless legions to battle; Japan makes overt gestures toward the Indies. Russia, the patient bear, crouches in the north, watches . . . and waits. . . .

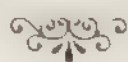
I don't know. I honestly don't know. The manuscript is probably a hoax. And yet . . . and yet . . .

Anyway, here it is, Brian O'Shea. Here is what you asked for. You'll find it on the cover of this magazine. If this magazine is one of those through which you still have to search, the world you mourn may yet blossom anew.

And because covers, like man's freedom and dreams and hopes, too often crumble into dust, the formula you want is printed here again, man of the future.

$C_{55}H_{70}O_6N_4Mg$ is the empirical formula for chlorophyll, Brian O'Shea!

$C_{55}H_{70}O_6N_4Mg!$



*With thanks to Dwayne Olson, Chris
Puckelwartz, and as always, Peter Ruber,
plus special thanks to Tom Stinski
—Arkham House, April 2005*

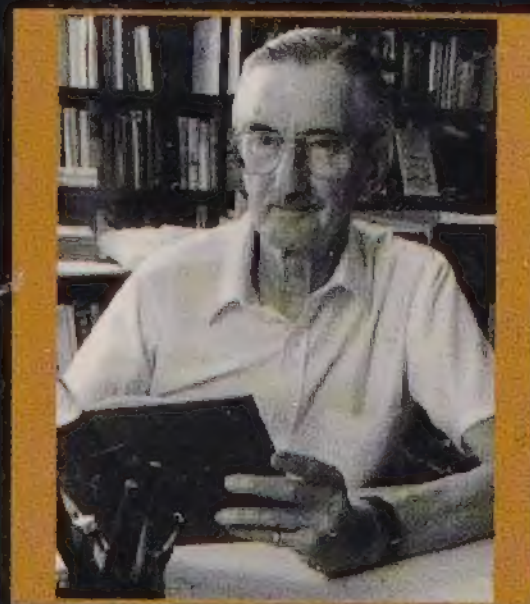
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NELSON BOND

NELSON BOND,

at 95, can still be seen driving his car around Roanoke, Virginia, stepping on a plane for Las Vegas to visit

one of his sons, or puttering in his workroom meticulously annotating the results of his prolific literary career. Many people believe that Bond is a creation of his own fantastic imagination, and probably he is. He is the author of seven books, hundreds of short stories, and an equal number of radio and television dramas and stage plays. Since retiring from writing in the 1960's, Bond founded a successful public relations agency, then became a widely respected antiquarian bookseller. His stories have appeared in countless anthologies in numerous hardcover and paperback editions. His books have been translated into German, Dutch, Swedish, Italian, Spanish and Japanese, and published in English language editions in Great Britain, Canada, and Australia. Nelson Bond's previous Arkham House books are *Nightmares and Daydreams* (1968), and *The Far Side of Nowhere* (2002).



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